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Violence

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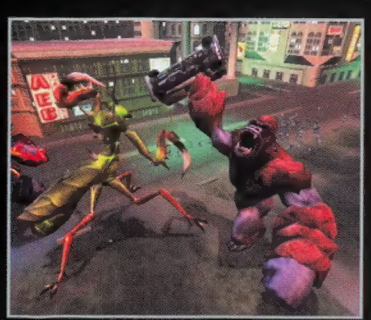

PlayStation.2

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now and then

I had a whole speech ready about the unjust persecution of Michael Jackson (the gist of which was how we might be better off with more Peter Pans and fewer judgmental talk-show hosts) and a gamer's-eye view of the potential (at least as of this printing) war on Iraq. But we got to talking at the close of the issue and, well, we decided to leave the politics to Bill Maher. Instead, I'd like to broach the topic of video-game length and replayability, a subject that came up while sitting around the conference room as we fired up Ikaruga, which came in on the last day of the issue, on the big screen.

A few short years ago, a two-hour-long action game might take you ten hours (or more; remember Ninja Gaiden or Batman on NES?) to beat the first time through (while chiseling you into a hardcore gamer), but you loved it so much you'd play it again and again until you memorized every inch of every level. A great two- or three-hour game might have seen 100 hours of play or more; games like Magician Lord, Strider, Ghouls 'n' Ghosts, Mega Man, Ranger X, Gunstar Heroes, Guardian Heroes, Castlevania IV, Actraiser, Revenge of Shinobi...I could go on and on. These days, however, in the wake of drop-dead gorgeous games that take years and millions of dollars to create, like Rygar, GunValkyrie, Devil May Cry 2, Kung Fu Chaos, Ratchet & Clank (again I could go on and on), it seems that if a game clocks in at under 10 hours, it's considered too short. So the question is, why don't we replay our games anymore? And why do so many people bitch when a game is hard? Have we become spoiled? Are today's games just too easy to warrant replaying? Or perhaps games are being elongated for the wrong reasons, like finding keys or sitting through cinematics.

play girl debut

After much ado about everything, we've finally found our mascot, thanks to Noah Brewer and lots and lots of very pleasing emails. Say hello to Drama.

It would seem that we should be playing games longer, but it's just not the case. Our thinking? Well, we're of the belief that many of today's games are either too easy or too forgiving, with saves all over the place, your character reappearing right where you fell or died. Gone is that insatiable urge to earn your way to that next gorgeous level because there's no doubt as to whether or not you'll get there. Codes are partly to blame, but the rest resides at the company level where confused marketers scratch their heads trying to figure out what makes gamers tick. Perhaps that very thing has changed. Is gaming digging its own grave by becoming too vanilla? If any Joe can walk through a given adventure, how long before the real gamers, the backbone of the industry, call it a day, and just start playing strictly retro? We honed our skills to be elite not to have some bozo highlight the next spot on the map. I can see one possible scenario where many enthusiast consumers might limit themselves to buying a few AAA first-party titles a year and spending the rest of their gaming dollars on eBay or working away on their stacks of residual 16- and 32-bit stuff. Go back and beat Astal again, or re-live the magic of Sin and Punishment a few hundred more times.

I'm not saying gameplay is dead, not even: this year is going to be fantastic, we're merely spotting a trend and playing out a possible scenario—namely the one we fear. We just want to make sure that the Treasures, Bungees, Konamis, Capcoms, Tecmos, Nintendos, Smilebits, Naughty Dogs (etc., etc.) of the world know how much we appreciate what they do. What do you think? As always we'd love to hear and print your comments. In the meantime, meet our new mascot, Drama (who you'll be seeing a lot more of in issues to come), created by our new pal, Gainax-bound Noah Brewer, and enjoy the latest issue of **play**.

"...we're of the belief that many of today's games are either too easy or too forgiving..."

dave halverson editor-in-chief
dhalverson@playmagazine.com

play magazine 04/03

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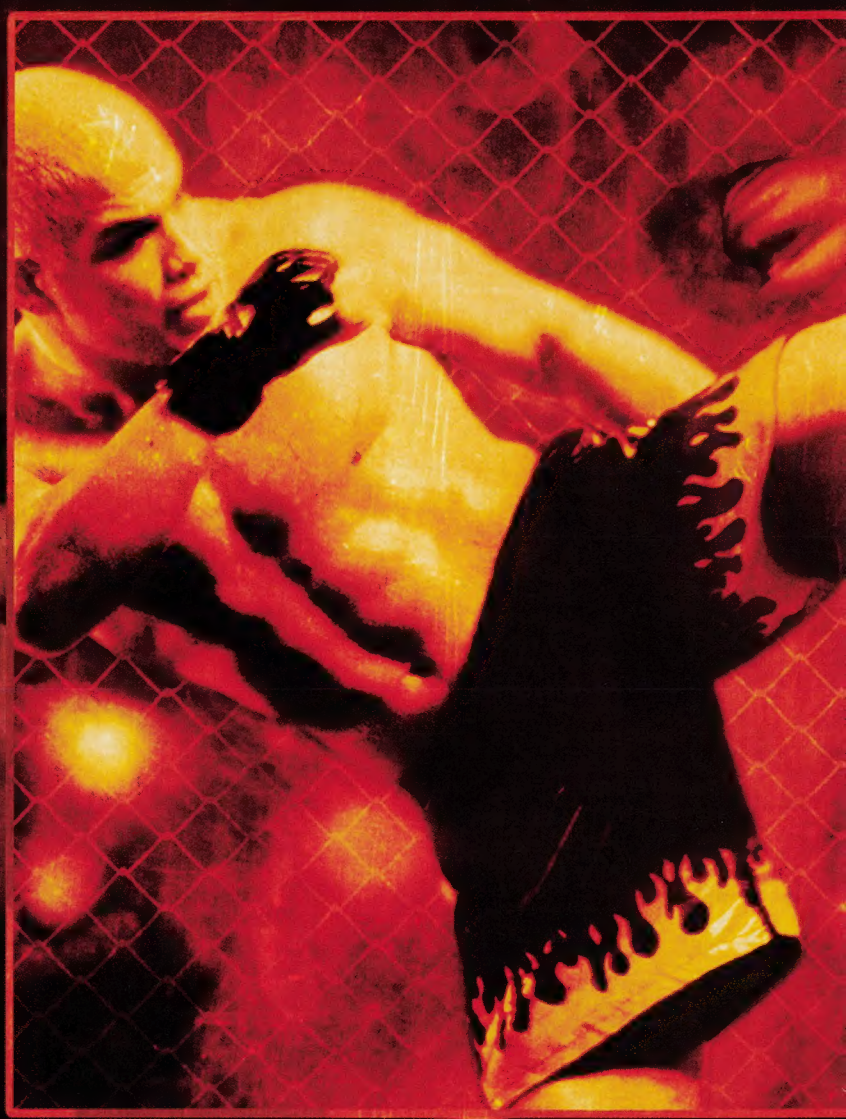

TEEN
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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Violence

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ATARI

cover story
rayman 3: hoodlum havoc
014

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KOJIMA SUNNY SIDE UP

pray for good weather...

Hideo Kojima, the mastermind behind such über games as Metal Gear Solid and Zone of the Enders has either flipped his lid or is truly on to something grand... He's developed the world's first light-sensitive video game: an action-RPG for the Game Boy Advance called Boktai. If by light-sensitive you're thinking light, as in light bulb...no, uh-uh. The game actually features sunlight-sensitive gameplay. Meaning, the actual GBA cartridge will have a sunlight sensor on board that, when exposed to sunlight, will power up the game's hero. The longer players play the game indoors, the more power he expends and the weaker he becomes. Therefore, players will be encouraged to play outside... Okay, I see. Since gamers are considered closet geeks that rarely see the sun (not true, I saw it just last week), Kojima's trying to get us off of our cans and into the sun where we can get mashed by oncoming traffic trying to beat a boss while crossing the street! The Weather channel's ratings will skyrocket, and on any given day in America patios will be ablaze with game BGM. Skylight sales will soar, and there's sure to a run on Beetle convertibles. Nevertheless, we do have a few questions like...what if you live in Alaska? Or how about if you own an SP where the cart faces down? And what about a sequel? Would it have to be moon powered? These questions and more will be answered as soon as the weather clears or we get a ROM, whichever comes first.

These shots reveal how the game changes time, although, how the player's solar charge will factor in to night (or indoors) play remains to be seen...

ENIX STAGE LEFT

SAMMY SEGA Jr.

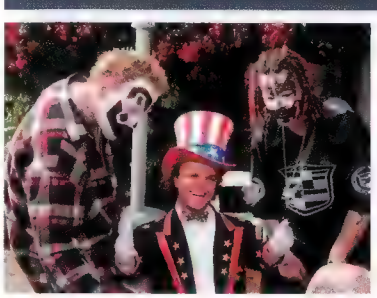
KING OF THE WORLD

Miyamoto meets his public

On February 21, Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo's gaming godfather and the man behind some of the most successful video game characters in history, took a trip to London to meet his public. Dozens of loyal fans lined the streets, spending the night outside of the Virgin Megastore in central London, with the crowd growing to over 1,000 when game signing began. From 1 pm until 3 pm, fans were able to meet Miyamoto, who was in Europe to promote The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past/ Four Swords and The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker, as well as sign video games and posters for his fans, some of whom traveled from the farthest reaches of England and Scotland and even from Holland, Belgium and Denmark for the chance to meet the gaming legend.

Shelly Friend, Head of PR, Nintendo of Europe commented, "It's been a fantastic day, and we were really pleased to see the reception Mr. Miyamoto received from his excited and loyal fans who were thanked for their support with a personal handshake from their hero." It's refreshing, to say the least, that Miyamoto still commands such respect. The fact remains that to this day there are few things as exalted as a first-party Nintendo game. So, will Miyamoto stop here in America? Well, perhaps if he can borrow the Popemobile…

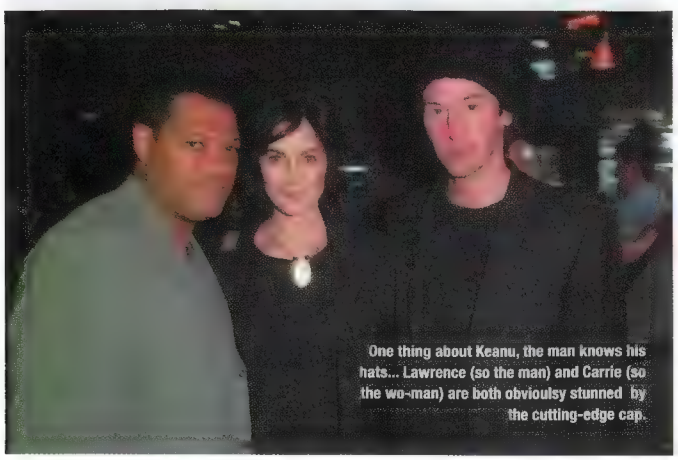
WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE...



Recently Eidos let the dogs out when they held their balls-out event for their upcoming Backyard Wrestling video games (you see why we love junkets so much), which we'll preview in May. The festivities, held in posh Beverly Hills, included such luminaries as scantily clad women, midgets (make that "little people") and bloody freaks who like to hurt each other for money. God Bless America! Send these guys to Iraq and Saddam is meat! Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope, otherwise known as the Insane Clown Posse, and stars of the infamous JCW wrestling league (God help us) will be appearing in the games. If the clown shoe fits…

NO PILL REQUIRED...

Matrix Phase One: The Party



One thing about Keanu, the man knows his hats... Lawrence (so the man) and Carrie (so the wo-man) are both obvioulsy stunned by the cutting-edge cap.

Not everyone of you has read the Bible or eaten sushi, but every single one of you will see the Matrix: Reloaded at some point in your life. Here comes the belated sequel to what countless movie junkies consider the best sci-fi trip yet. Shot No. 2 is arriving in May, No. 3 in November, and meantime the hype is flowing from several neophyte pop-culture sources. The gaming followers get a game not merely loosely based on the movie — it's tied symbiotically in a way that's never been done before (see preview this issue). And then there's the Animatrix (also see this issue), a chronology of nine short anime from renowned Japanese directors, inspired by the Matrix universe. For an intimate look into all that is Reloaded, Warner Brothers and Infogrames threw a massive party after unveiling the first of the Animatrix shorts, The Final Flight of the Osaris, on their massive studio lot. Dave Perry, president of Shiny and creator of the Reloaded video game, joined the film's producer Joel Silver to praise the ambition and new precedence the game/film tie-in represents; it was actually quite exciting seeing a hint of what's on the table for the future of both amazing forms of entertainment strengthening each other. Upon dispensing with the obligatory introductions, it was off to party with tons of celebrities, actors from the film, and lucky Angelinos pretty enough to decorate the festivities. Glowing green adult refreshments poured forth in excess, sparkling under the slick pulse of Matrix-themed lighting. With no VIP section to hide in, everyone was out playing the Matrix: Reloaded, including the stars whose likenesses underpin the game. Whether sharing a cigarette with Laurence Fishburne, chatting it up with a docile Marilyn Manson while he joined DJ Paul Okenfold in spinning the music, or watching Will Smith take too much glee in controlling his wife's pixel-double in Reloaded, the night was complete; we all want to bloody see the movie now!

GAMING... GOOD FOR U?

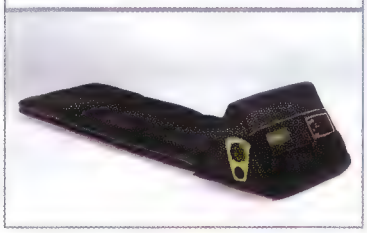
Sorry Mr Lieberman, but a recent study was unveiled that video games, once only a popular opinion, are actually good for you! Professor Edwardo Briggs and colleagues at Loyola University College have been studying Counter-Strike culture by taking part in games, interviewing players and observing their kills at in-game locales. Prof. Wright said that the research shows that Counter-Strike and other such games (like FPS and MechAssault) are about much more than gore-spurting and racking up kills. The strategy and tactics used by many regular players and teams, or clans, often matter. It seems like a game of chess, to [illegible]. The importance of the social side of Counter-Strike was revealed in the complex banter, in-jokes and insults that people exchanged during play, said Prof. Wright. To outsiders this game talk can be incomprehensible and hard people to understand what is going on. Players also tended to bring their offline culture with them when they play. It was often obvious when teenage boys were playing, he said, because there was much more trash talk and sexist or homophobic insults flying around. But, he said, it was a mistake to think that this meant that gamers were misanthropes. "The most common insults when people are playing [illegible]" said Prof. Wright. The only reason that people can get away with insulting friends and foes was because they knew there no ends, he said. Gamers that were not team oriented [illegible] and good teamwork, Prof. Wright added. As a result, players prefer to game with people they know rather than strangers and they tend to form [illegible] where these [illegible] and are present. As well as good tactical players also are known and liked, but the [illegible] respect and reputation as a [illegible] the players of the game. He claims that people using the Web online offer [illegible] where one has [illegible] respect the game, said Prof. Wright, and the Internet [illegible] people to [illegible] is part of the huge attraction. "It gives people an [illegible] participating, a social kind of activity that they could not do in real life that allows them to play with their own [illegible]. It is an area that's [illegible] from everyday life that you can enter and leave at will," he said. "It offers you a way to play with things you may be scared of in a safe way where there are very few consequences." For this reason, and others, Prof. Wright believes that gaming is [illegible] good for players. Before [illegible] more studies of game playing [illegible] proved by hidden agendas. "There's a colossal credit that underlies the criticism that go on around this," he said. "The idea of [illegible] violently is given short shrift in cultures where [illegible] given the highest praise."

PS2 CASTELVANIA IS GO!

Here's the news that makes you very, very happy: Konami is well underway in the development of the latest Castlevania, which will surface early fall of this year. Produced by Koji Igareshi and the team responsible for the PlayStation 2D masterpiece Symphony of the Night, as well as the extraordinary Harmony of Dissonance and Aria of Sorrow for GBA—what an amazing track record!—this currently unnamed Castlevania will take place in the atmospheric goth of Transylvania. Could we be so lucky as to get a 2D-inspired version of the game the likes of what Konami did with Contra. E3 is where the answers transpire.

CHAIR

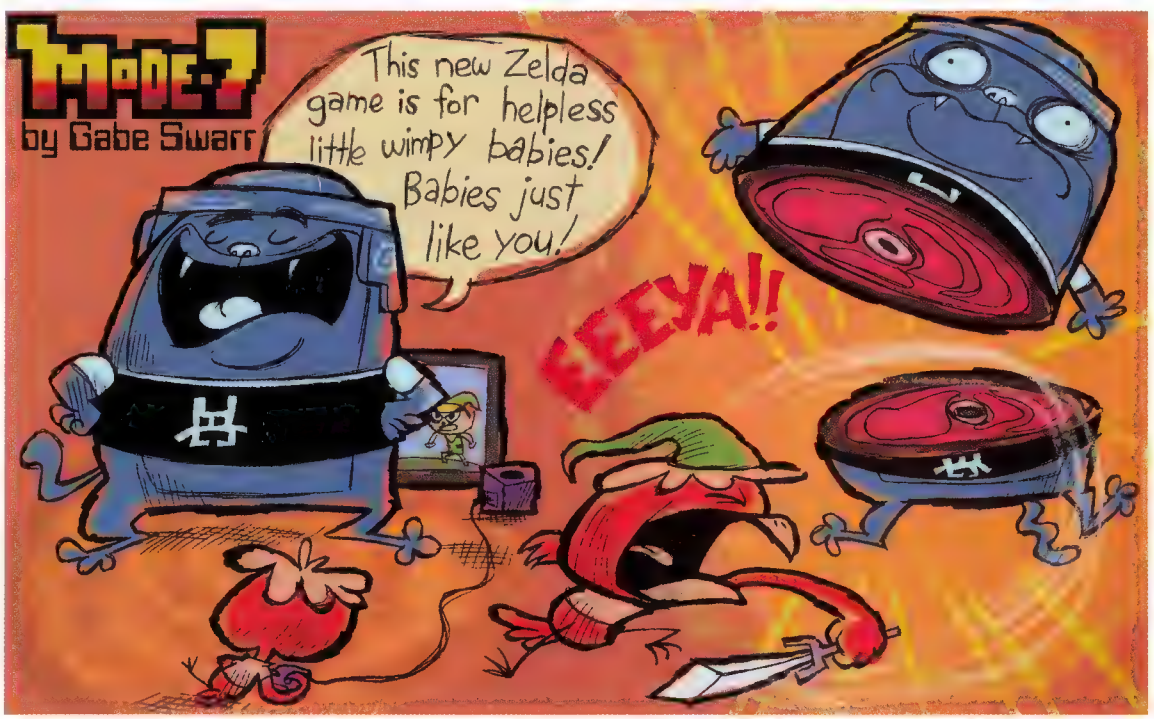
There are few things better than relaxing around on a rainy day playing games, and there's no better way to do so than with the Pyramat Interactive Couch Pad. If you like playing on the floor due to more ground area, this cozy device is a godsend. Not only can you configure it like a chair or lounge, but it comes with a textured volume control and listening sound system that sends good vibrations directly via your couch when connected to your gaming system, TV or DVD player. A fully equipped PS2/GCN model costs $149.99 and has a built-in sound system consisting of two speakers and one 4-inch subwoofer. You can even convert the Pyramat to sit and table with the P1100 Pyramat which fits neatly beside the three corners of the Pyramat to make a sturdy and handy. For more information, pages are to go online.



MIRRA GONE WILD

Was XXX a Mirra image?

BMX mogul Dave Mirra is seeking a whopping $21 million in damages and injunctions to stop Acclaim from promoting and advertising his name and likeness with BMX XXX, stemming from a deal he and Acclaim had dating back to 2001. The suit alleges breach of contract, unfair competition, injury to reputation, false advertising and invasion of privacy, adding insult to injury regarding the XXX brand (not that we're likely to see a sequel), which has already seen its share of ridicule. Several large retailers declined to stock XXX during the holiday season due to its questionable content, some of which Acclaim edited out before XXX even hit the market, and the title began to tank. The relationship between Mirra and Acclaim began to show signs of strain last May. After agreeing to having his name adorn XXX, thinking it would feature more toilet humor then the porn fiasco it became, Mirra "expressed grave concern over his association with a now pornographic XXX game, since it would have a negative impact on his name." But apparently Mirra's name has appeared on ads and marketing materials and so he's lookin' for Wapner. Our two cents? Well, we'd hoped for a more playful nudie BMX game celebrating the female form rather then degrading it, but it certainly doesn't seem like Acclaim meant Mirra any harm. Then again, the game sucked anyway so, who the hell cares?



rikku looking good in square's final fantasy x-2

play games

014 cover story: rayman 3
For the third time, and for the first time since the departure of series' creator Michel Ancel, Rayman gets into it one more time, big time.

024 previews
050 reviews
064 advance notice
067 sports

game scoring system

According to the reviewer, perfectly represents its genre. our highest recommendation.

Just shy of greatness in the reviewer's eyes for a given reason, but highly recommended.

A solid game, good in many respects, the variable being issues with certain elements like control, animation or design.

A merely average game with significant flaws, but perhaps a good premise or concept.

Something to be avoided, a game with this score is a failure in nearly every respect.

a look inside

rayman 3 hoodlum havoc

system: **playstation 2, gamecube, xbox** / developer: **ubi soft** / publisher: **ubi soft** / available: **now**

words dave halverson

It's not very often (it's actually never happened) that we review a game and then do a cover, but the latest chapter in the Rayman saga defies convention. In case you missed it, here's a highlight from last month's review:

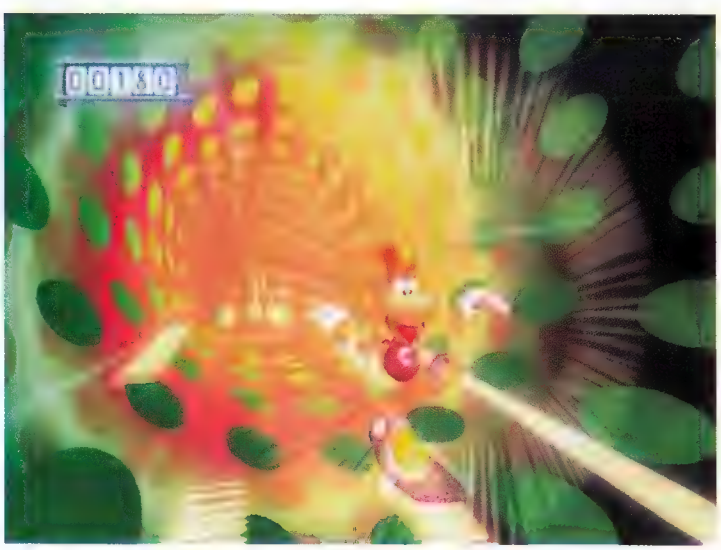
"I wish there was a magic trigger I could pull to coax you to buy this game, because to me, it's what we've been building towards all of these years, as technology has crept up to meet developers' visions; not bassist violence or gratuitous sex, but the ability to remove us from reality."

Whoa, me quoting me — trippy. Sappy? Maybe, but well deserved — you'll not find a single other game quite like this one on any platform. Rayman is a universe unto itself, unlike any other. A union of diverse play mechanics and brilliantly orchestrated levels, Hoodlum Havoc's of that rare ilk that completely removes us from reality, whisking us away to a world of Teensies, Lums, Hoodlums, and plum juice addiction.

Rayman and Globox's new journey is one that took an army of gifted and dedicated professionals many years to complete, from the amazing development team at Ubi Soft France to the vocal stylings of John Leguizamo and other talented actors to the core of Ubi Soft's PR and marketing — the people responsible for letting the world know…and getting it out there for everyone to see (which is where we come in).

For our part, we thought we'd kill two Black Lums with one detached limb by bringing you not only the interview — which among other things introduces Rayman's new homies — but also developer diaries from key players on the team, and to cap it all off, a chat with John Leguizamo, who chimes in about voice acting, games, movies, and slipping into the role of Rayman's freaky purple side kick.

It's rare that a franchise receives equal treatment across every major platform, honed to perfection on each, but Rayman is a very special character and Globox, well, he's just a big bright shining star.



interview

ahmed boukhelifa / producer, Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc

"We really wanted to be true to the best aspects of the franchise—plenty of action, trippy and amazing worlds, great graphics, engaging gameplay and wacky characters."

play: I'll start with the obvious—this being the first Rayman sans Michel Ancel—can you tell us about this team? What they've worked on and how they came to be.
Ahmed Boukhelifa: Well, Rayman 2 was conceived by Michel Ancel and his team of developers in the south of France, but as the project evolved it became clear that many more talented people would be needed to complete the project. A second team of developers was assembled in Paris, and worked closely with Michel. After the release of Rayman 2, a number of the Paris developers went straight to work on Rayman 3—the art director, lead game designer, lead programmer, and lead AI designer all worked on Rayman 2. And while Michel was focusing largely on new projects, he did serve as a consultant and provided plenty of input into the Rayman 3.

So, you're charged with taking Ubi's bread and butter franchise and energizing what's already considered one of the greatest platformers ever (with Great Escape). Tell us how you arrived at the decision to rig Rayman with all of his new accoutrements.
With Rayman 3, we really wanted to remain true to the best aspects of the franchise—plenty of action, trippy and amazing worlds, great graphics, engaging gameplay, and wacky characters—while exploring new directions. Rayman has grown up a little, and while he still loves a good time, he's also a serious fighter when he needs to be. We wanted to make combat a more integral and more varied element of the game, so we decided that Rayman should have a host of new powers that he would need to complete his missions and to compete with a wildly varied bunch of formidable—and smart—enemies.

Before we get to the game and gameplay, let's talk story and voice acting. John Leguizamo is fantastic as Globox. Did you have him in mind from the get-go?
Thanks. We knew we wanted to make the voices a really integral part of the game, to heighten the sense of immersion into the world of the game and to keep every detail of the production top-notch. While we did not have John Leguizamo in mind from the very beginning, we knew what qualities we were seeking for Globox. We spent a long time looking for actors for both Murfy and Globox, and when we selected Billy West and John Leguizamo, we knew they were perfect—West injects Murfy with a great sardonic tone, while John brings a wonderful frenzied energy to his role. His innovative vocal talents made Globox—from his possession by Andre the Dark Lum Lord to his cowardly bravado—hilarious for the entire game.

The story overall—the way the Teensies are now woven in, the doctors, the in-game banter, Globox's crazy quips—it's all just magical. Did you write this game first and then code around the script? How do you assemble your cast?
We worked really hard to make the story engaging and interesting, and it was generally a collaborative process. First, we sketched out the broad details of the storyline, and then we began the coding. At each stage, we look for the most talented people, whether it's behind the scenes or the cast. As we auditioned plenty of actors for the parts of Globox and Murfy, we took a long time to make sure we found the right voices for the other characters, like the three wacky Teensie doctors and Andre the Dark Lum Lord, who makes evil pronouncements from deep with Globox's belly for much of the game.

I want to talk seriously about lighting for a moment, seeing as how you blew me away as profoundly as when I laid eyes on Loaded (PS) for the first time. In the Hunter's mansion (he's hysterical by the way), you bathe a certain room with an almost indescribable shower of powdery light. First, does this look the same across all formats, and second, where did you find this technique? I thought we'd seen all the PS2 had to give...
The game does look the same across all platforms—we worked to maximize the graphics capabilities of each individual platform, so the graphics are stunning no matter which you choose. We built the game directly on the PS2, though, which did present some challenges. The PS2 has a pretty significant learning curve, so it took some time to master the complexities of the architecture: an understanding of the system is necessary to achieve proper results and performances. The graphic engine we developed uses and parallelizes all of the processors and was optimized constantly. This means that the engine was rewritten many times, with each rewrite enhancing the speed and display possibilities. As the engine improved, our artists had more to work with, and they delivered some amazing stuff: at one point, you can see more than 60 animated Hoodlums, plus Rayman and Globox, as well as some other characters, with the game still running at 60 frames per second. We're quite proud of what we managed to achieve. There are plenty of visual effects, from water and grass to lighting and glows to mirrors and other reflective surfaces, that enhance the game a great deal.

The whole game for that matter, especially deeper in, has a glow about it—layered skies, wispy fog, the amazing spirit tower, and insane reflections. Do all three platforms exhibit the same prowess, and how do you go about sculpting your levels? I mean, what's the process? Does it start with a certain person's vision and build from there, or are you more communal in your design approach?
It's really a collaborative process—we begin by deciding on a few key directions and elements, and then everyone begins the work of creating the game. As Rayman 3 developed and everybody's creative juices began flowing, lots of new and exciting ideas surfaced that eventually became part of the game—we filled out the details of the story and script while we were coding, and all worked together to make the game special. It's like a big stew: you start with really quality individual ingredients, and as they come together, they blend to create something even more delicious than you imagined!

Tell us about Psychedelic Skate (I cannot believe how insane it becomes). The first-ever between-level segues that actually add to the game experience. What prompted this: Rez, or perhaps some really good pharmaceuticals?
Yeah, we were tweaking on Advil and caffeine, man. No, really, there's a story behind them. In Rayman 2: The Great Escape and Rayman 2: Revolution, Rayman and Globox would travel from place to place with the help of the Teensies and their mysterious portals. In Rayman 3, we decided to show what was behind the portals—the Teensie Highways. We had an idea of what we wanted to do, and as we were working to develop it, some guys came in and presented this incredible music. Immediately we knew that we wanted to use the music as the sonic backdrop for the highways, and worked to create visuals that would really complement the tunes—so each different highway has a slightly different look, like disco, or psychedelic, and you can fly along to the beat.

Since The Great Escape, the gaming landscape has changed and continues to dramatically. Games of this nature (along with Mario, Sonic, Zelda, Crash, etc.) used to rule the day. Nowadays, however, games with little tact and technological prowess seem to get unhealthy amounts of coverage from a less-experienced US press corps and attract a buyer who buys little else (because he likely isn't into games for the long haul or for the same reasons the consumers are that got us here). All this leaves real gamers in a bit of a pinch. Do you sell out and create a gratuitous walkthrough of a game bathed in toilet humor and

plasma, or do you keep cranking out justice such as this until those people go on to their next hobby? Or, perhaps the answer is in signing on A-list actors such as JL. That way you make them lifers by showing them how fulfilling gameplay can be. Of course you need to get it into their hands first. Your comments, or do you even trouble yourself with such thoughts?
The industry has changed, no doubt about it. One of the nice things about the evolution of gaming is that there are so many things to choose from that anyone can find something appealing, even if there are a lot of ho-hum games out there today. Our first priority was to create a game that will be enjoyable for everyone, and with Rayman 3, I think we've done that. That's what really drives us, and when you're working with incredibly talented people, then there isn't one right answer, or one thing to do. We've included Pixar-like graphics, a great storyline, crazy characters, intense combat, thrilling gameplay—and, yes, a bit of toilet humor—in an effort to attract both serious and novice gamers. Rayman is a recipe for success, so the changes are designed to improve and advance the franchise, rather than cater to any specific group of people.

I guess what I'm trying to get at is that this game should do massive numbers; in fact, I think it's vital that this side of gaming get back into the limelight. For all the violence, "they" (the bastards) spout off about, no one focuses on the real magic anymore, and this game has it. How will Ubi Soft ensure R3 gets the attention it deserves?
Ubi Soft is pulling out all the stops for Rayman to show gamers that, like them, Rayman's grown up and gotten edgier. There's a really hilarious television commercial running in the US that alludes to Rayman's...uh...generous endowment. We've done a lot of very successful outreach to the gaming community to showcase, as you say, the magic of the game. The inclusion of John Leguizamo and Billy West, as well as Groove Armada's music on the in-game demo, has helped raise awareness. And now that the game's launched, we'll be hitting the streets with a mall and event tour that will bring Rayman to the masses. So keep an eye out.

R3 raises the obvious question: seeing as how the Rayman TV series was before its time (and not true to the universe), is there talk of a Shrek-like film based on this amazing world?
We're definitely interested in possibilities for taking a great character like Rayman into other mediums, but we've been concentrating on developing the very best game possible. Maybe after we take a long vacation...

And finally, looking into the big three's crystal balls (oooh, that sounded bad) where do you see games of this nature going from this point? I mean, what will the next wave of hardware bring to the adventure/platforming table? Is there anything left that you want to do, but still can't?
We're incredibly proud of Rayman 3, although there is always more that we wish we could do. In terms of the future, I think the platforms will continue to expand both their graphic and interactive capabilities, providing for even more immersive, engaging experiences—possibly ones that allow gamers to have even more influence on the universes in terms of levels, morality, narrative, visuals, everything. And Rayman will still be out in front, leading the pack!

"We're incredibly proud of Rayman 3, although there is always more that we wish we could do. "

michael janod / lead designer

How did I end up in the industry? The answer lies in years of playing video games, reading comic books, listening to music, making demos, participating in role-playing games and studying computer science. The past five years I've worked in the industry have been dedicated to Rayman.

- 1998-99: Level Designer on Rayman 2: The Great Escape. I was responsible for some maps and also went above and beyond the call of duty by offering up and programming some of the more exotic gameplay, including water skiing, the missile with legs and the flying ship.
- 2001-02: Lead Designer on Rayman 3. My first steps in full-fledged design!

Determining the main character's abilities, as well as the enemies and obstacles that would lead the player to use these abilities, was one of my first tasks on Rayman 3. I then oversaw a team of Level Designers in charge of designing the worlds where all the enemies, obstacles and abilities come together to create fun and original gaming combinations.

Making the sequel to Rayman 2 was a challenge. We had to build on the game's personality, quality and versatility, all the while being innovative and creative. We wanted tenacious and lively enemies and obstacles as well as an arcade-style atmosphere. As a tribute to the arcade tradition, we even decided to add a scoring meter because it's a great way to stimulate competition and challenge the player.

The combat and arcade elements really come together with the use of Rayman's five powers, which are fun, original and easy to use. They set the dynamic pace of the game because the effects are only temporary and you have to go all out when you have them. They also come with a range of different costumes for Rayman, which are slightly tongue-in-cheek because of their tacky, Mexican-wrestler look.

Because they must be used strategically in order to obtain the best scores, the powers add to the overall challenge of the game. Moreover, they replace the weapons that players often enjoy but that are not part of the Rayman universe.

In the end, of course, all of this means nothing without great level design. So, I'm happy to say that I had an excellent team of level designers working with me. Some Hoodlums were tough to include in the game because of their peculiar characteristics: one is on stilts, one hides behind a shield and yet another ducks for cover while shooting at Rayman. These characters didn't make things easy for us. But fair is fair: think of all the hits and abuse they received during the three years of development!

olivier dauba / lead gameplay programmer

Tried to program the games I either could not get or could not afford on my Thomson MO5 in the early eighties. None of those games actually made it out of my bedroom.

• Became a formally trained rocket scientist. Soon realized that rocket science was nowhere near as fun as it was in the sixties, and decided to make a living out of my gaming habit.

• 1996-1999: Gameplay Programmer on Rayman 2: The Great Escape. I honed my skills with some great folks on what I still regard as one of the genre's best games.

• 2000 and counting: Lead Gameplay Programmer on Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc.

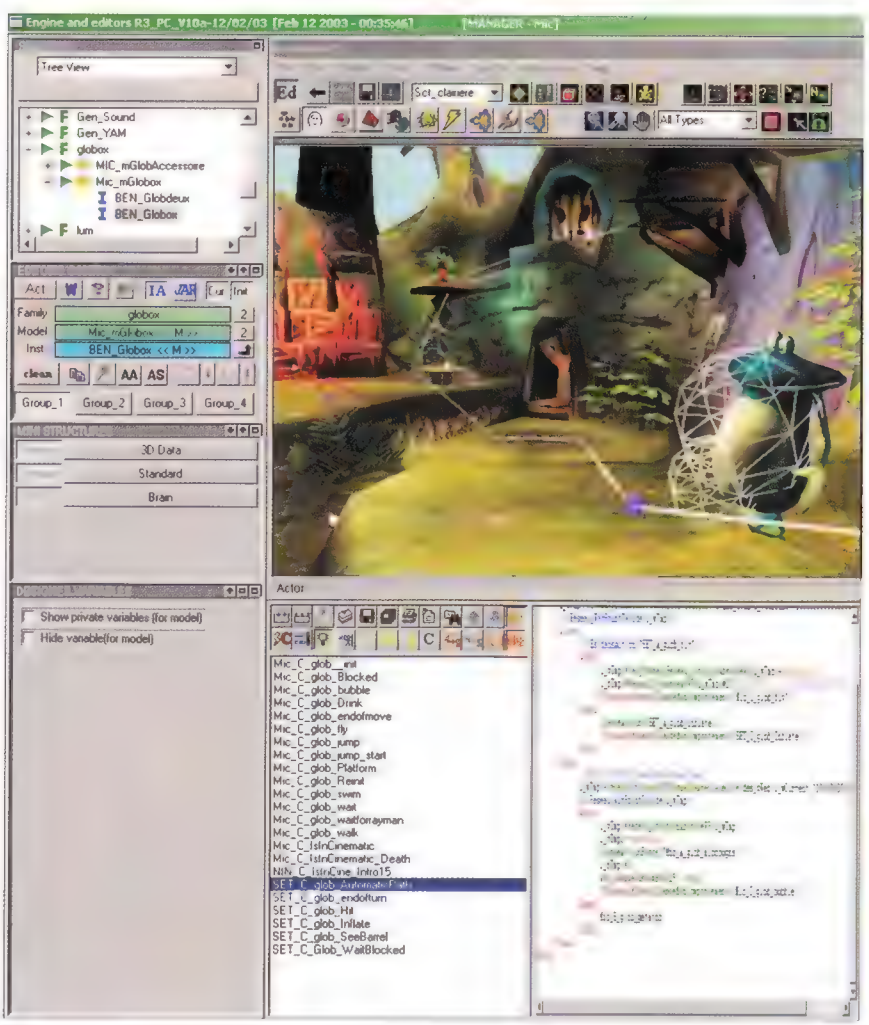
We knew that jumping on Rayman 3 just after Rayman 2 was going to be a tough challenge. Rayman 2 was a critically acclaimed game that raised the bar for us, and none of us wanted a sequel by numbers. We had to be original and push boundaries by blending different genres and influences to create something new. This was one of the key design drives on Rayman 3.

Oddly enough, Half Life on PC was one our influences. We wanted the same gripping combat and the same clever mix of AI and level design that make each encounter an intense and memorable event. Production resulted in much back and forth between a team of tightly knit programmers and designers to ensure we reached the desired level of intensity. The only drawback was that, in Rayman's fantasy, cartoon-themed world, there are no real-world boundaries or limitations as in a contemporary first-person shooter. The only limits are your own. Add a massive amount of bosses, wacky gameplay and bonus levels and you start to understand the challenges we faced.

My role on the project included overseeing game assets programming – from enemies and bosses to camera behaviors and scripted events – and making sure these elements were not only technically sweet but also deepened the gaming experience. The new generation of hardware opened up a whole new range of possibilities. We've been able to tap into the hardware to bring Rayman's world to new heights outside of the core gameplay mechanics. This touches on everything from real weather to dynamic loading for continuous play. The world is also dynamically populated in real time with all kinds of interactive animals.

One area in which Hoodlum Havoc rules is storytelling and humor, which was a lot of work for us programmers. I can't think of a single game with so many nonobstrusive dialogues. A whole story unfolds in front of you as you play. Programming Globox Rayman's buddy, was a real challenge. He's not a sidekick you can put on your shoulder or in a backpack like Daxter or Clank. He's at least twice the size of Rayman. Not only did he have to be autonomous and manage his way through the scenery, but he also had to be funny and bring the game's "buddy-dynamic" to life. You'll have to see it for yourself because the results are too cool for words. When you are right in the middle of some kick-ass fight, you'll laugh your heart out when your drunk buddy starts running around doing some crazy moves while spouting off jokes at the same time.

And Globox isn't the only crazy character; Murfy also adds his zany personality to the mix. People who've played the game so far have all agreed that the depth of the characters really brings the game to life. It's one of the few games where somebody can watch you play and have a blast as well. You won't have to argue with your girlfriend about playing games on the TV because she'll want to watch you play.



Yes, it is as hard to make these things as it looks

céline tellier / art and technical director

I studied graphic design and advertising at a fine arts school, but discovered that this wasn't my calling after just a few internships. I quit school during my third year and joined Ubi Soft in 1997 as a junior artist. All at once, I discovered computers, 3D and video games while working on character design for a platform game.

Then Rayman 2 started and I concentrated on textures and environments, basic level design and graphical touch-ups. It was a great personal and professional experience that really paved the way for Rayman 3.

During the conception phase of the Rayman 3 project, I served as the Art and Technical Director. Once production got started, my main task became the management of the graphic design team.

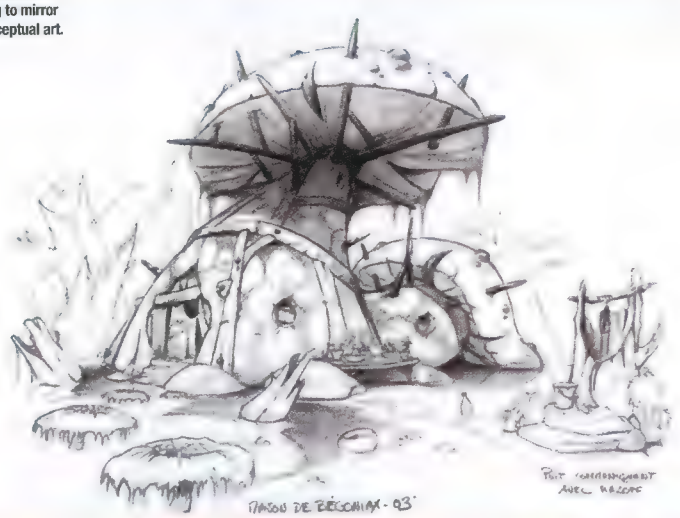
Graphically speaking, the challenge was to top what Rayman 2 had achieved. To do this, we put together a team of talented and specialized artists. One of these artists was Eric Pelatan, an illustrator who had previously worked on Rayman. He and I worked together during the conception phase. In addition to drawing all of the ideas generated in our early brainstorming sessions, Eric helped me train the graphic artists who worked on the project. We were also able to count on the helping hand of Rayman's original creator Michel Ancel. He reviewed the project with us every six months and generally helped us along.

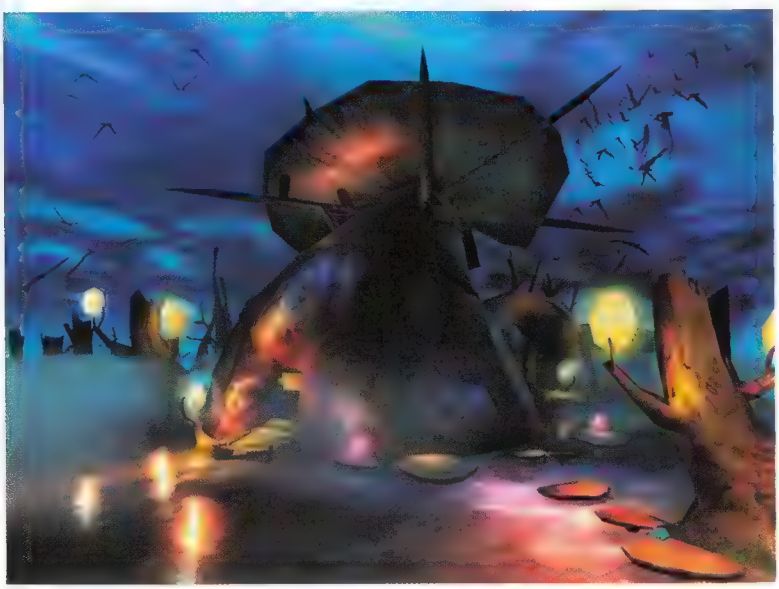
Rayman 3's graphic design was ambitious. It included environments where the main character is completely free to roam and explore an immersive, cartoony environment. This is thanks to the combined handling of polygons, textures and lighting, which allow the player to explore an imaginary world without worrying about how it was built.

The fact that we worked very little with generic object kits or scenery libraries also enhances the game's immersive nature. Indeed, each corridor and every room is unique. We pushed our texturing to be more than window dressing, as highlighted, for example, by little trompe-l'oeils. We opted for a traditional, hand-drawing approach.

Throughout the project, my job essentially revolved around communication and compromise. I worked with game designers to ensure a balance between, on the one hand, impressive but demanding scenery and, on the other, scenery that allows more characters to appear simultaneously. I worked with programmers on engine optimization; special, console-adapted FX tools for graphic designers; and collision management. I also worked with the scriptwriter to ensure the presence of visually stunning elements in the story, and with sound designers for sound-sensitive textures. In the end, only through effective communication were we able to rise up and meet the challenge of this massive project.

Finally, games are beginning to mirror their conceptual art.





There's so much color bursting forth that you can't help but feel its warmth

stan mettra / lead animator

Rayman 3 was my first experience as Lead Animator. My job included finalizing the characters, preparing the animation work and allocating it to my team. My previous experience included animation on Tonic Trouble N64 and some other Ubi Soft games. Long before that, my specialty was creating exciting new games on my Atari ST that never made it past the first levels because of my poor programming skills! To this day, I'm still fond of that time because my favorite games remain extreme 3D shooters like the Starglider 1 and 2 or the Dogfight series. Shoot or die!

From an animation standpoint, one of the first challenges we encountered with Rayman 3 was improving the main character. We wanted to give him new moves and a new look. As far as acrobatics are concerned, Rayman was already a good athlete in Rayman 2. He was swift and reactive, but we wanted to improve his fighting abilities. Now Rayman can use his new fist attacks (curve attack, straight attack, power charge...) when he is running, jumping, hair-copter-flying, rolling ahead or flipping back. This fit perfectly with our other goal: adding many more enemies and building on the lively and interactive aspect of the Rayman universe.

Rayman can catch magic power-boxes during the game that provide him access to five different combat suits with special powers. The main technical challenge to overcome here was finding the best way to optimize these additional modelizations to fit into the PS2 memory. We had to split the mesh in two to re-use the parts that didn't need a change from one suit to another. Combined with a texture-swapping technique, we succeeded in changing Rayman's appearance without having to load six complete meshes. The result is five exciting new visuals, including the deadly electrifying hook, the tornado punch and the mecha-rocket-fist!

Another major preoccupation we had was drawing the player into a lively and funny world. Since our characters had to remain quite simple, we poured extra energy into their reactivity and expressiveness. This translated into lots of specific animations and facial expressions, even if we were not sure the players would see it all in the heat of action. In particular, Rayman and his friend Globox benefited from quirky and silly animations that use specific morphing targets. The boss featured at the end of the game and his numerous transformations also required special attention.

Although the cartoon genre tends to be threatened by a huge majority of realistic, movie-like, lifeless games, I hope I can still work on funny and wacky games like Rayman in the future! Come on guys, let's turn on more games like this and really have fun!

françois queinnec / ps2 graphic programmer

I spent most of my childhood playing and programming little games on computers like the Oric Atmos, the Apple II and the Atari ST. I also tried my hand as a musician and as a (pretty bad) 2D artist doing demos on the Atari ST. I joined Ubi Soft in 1996, after earning a degree in computer science. Now I do what I like for a living (isn't that great?). I've worked on several games at Ubi, including the N64 and Dreamcast versions of Rayman 2.

Rayman 3 was a challenge from the start. We, of course, didn't want it to be "just some Rayman 2 sequel." It was a great game, but because it was designed for the N64, Rayman 2 featured some levels that were quite limited, with few enemies. We had to make it bigger and better, pushing the PlayStation 2's power to the limit. We wanted to display tons of characters and enemies simultaneously in extensive and detailed levels, while enhancing the graphical excellence that has been the trademark of the Rayman series.

The prospect of making such an ambitious game on PS2, a platform known to be difficult to master, gave me nightmares at first. As the project began, you would have heard a lot of "how do you expect to display all this and still remain in 60 frames per second?" from me. Not surprisingly, the very first versions of Rayman 3 weren't that impressive. The levels were kind of empty and ran around 30 fps. I remember discovering Jak & Daxter and asking myself: "How did they do that ?"

Then I entered a heavy, but worthwhile, rewriting process. I rewrote entire parts of the graphic engine several times. Each time I had an idea about how to make the graphic engine faster or better, I would implement it without hesitating, even if that meant rewriting most of my code! Why? Because the key to PS2 programming is quite simple: Forget all your other programming habits, understand the PS2 and think for the PS2. The hardware is so specific that you MUST think and program specifically for it. Once you realize this, you start learning a lot about the system and try to use it as much as possible.

At one point, a game designer told me: "I want to have something like 60 animated hoodlums displayed at the same time, as well as Rayman, Globox and some other enemies. And, oh yeah, I want to keep things running at 60 fps." As you can imagine, my first response was: "Yeah right, keep dreaming buddy." But after talking it over with our team and finding some nice tricks, we did it! And that's just one example among many.

I've only been talking about graphic programming, but everyone on our team kept just as busy, from sound programming, collisions and mechanics to animation and artificial intelligence. Loading a level while the previous one is still running may seem like a piece of cake, for example, but it took one of our programmers months to make this feature work correctly.

Now we can all look back and say that the past three years of hard work have paid off. The game is running at a constant 60 fps with amazing graphics and special effects. It features great gameplay, animation and sound and, most important of all, guaranteed FUN!

interview

john leguizamo / voice of globox

From his inspired portrayal of Clown in the Spawn movie to Ice Age's Sid and even Luigi, John Leguizamo always brings something special to his characters, live or otherwise...

"I loved Tetris, something about it just spoke to me. I would go to sleep seeing shapes, trying to put them in the right place. I still do that sometimes, just to unwind."

play: Tell me about your video-game past.
John Leguizamo: I guess earlier on, when I was a kid, there was a ping pong thing, a really prehistoric thing now that you look at it, that went ping-ping...that evolved to Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, Super Mario Bros. and especially Tetris. I loved Tetris, something about it just spoke to me. I would go to sleep seeing shapes, trying to put them in the right place. I still do that sometimes, just to unwind. Then there was Grand Theft Auto—I love that game, that is pretty amazing; that's as far as the game evolution has gone.

Do you have a gaming system in your house?
No, I got rid of all the gaming systems in my house; otherwise I will never get any work done. I had a PlayStation 2 and One.

Tell me about your character, Globox. You're doing a lot of lines for him! What is his personality like?
It's pretty wild, this is like the highest density of lines I have done for anything in my entire life. It's actually 242 cues in one day, which sounds like a lot, and it is. And it's a lot of dialog and you have to give it emotion and you have to give it feeling and, plus, because this is interactive, you got to give it a lot more energy than you normally would for a regular cartoon. Like when I did *Ice Age* I was still relaxed, I did it in a relaxed way, but Globox...he is sort of like...I don't know, it's like the Warner Bros.' frog meets some kind of alien being. He is hyper, sort of mystic, and a good buddy to Rayman, who is the lead of this game. And I've got a lot of information, and I have all the emotion that Rayman can't have, because he is a hero. I get to be afraid, I get to be upset and drunk, I get to be off the wall, trippy, cuckoo, wacky—you name it.

How did you come up with the voice that fit the character?
It was not easy. t "All the low voices start to sound kind of stupid," he said. "Make sure he is not stupid." So I said, "All right, I will try not to sound stupid, thank you." So we came up with the voice that's just a bit higher, just like it's energized, kind of like Jerry Lewis: "Whoa, whoa, whoa, lady, lady, I am nervous!"

So the Rayman series has been around since '95 and sold more than 11 million copies. Different generations are playing it. How does it feel to part of the phenomenon of Rayman?
I did not know it was around for that long. So I am pretty excited, I started out with the Super Mario Bros. in '93, and now with the Globox and Rayman, it's pretty cool. These games are great for kids; it gives them a chance to be interactive with one of these computers. It's kind of a basic learning tool, computer friendly. It's exiting to be part of it.

Do your kids recognize that it's your voice when watching a movie or playing a video game?
Our kids are kind of young, unless they are super geniuses or annoying precocious brats, which they are neither of. They recognize my voice, they can tell, especially when I point it to them. Then they really know it's me, because I just told them so.

What is the difference between doing voice-overs for an animated feature versus the game?
It's different levels of difficulty, for a movie is such a long process till you get the voice just right...and also the moods. And they really have to sound as if they are talking to each other...that takes a long time but is not so intensive. This [game] is really intensive and takes lots and lots of energy. So, in this one you have to visualize the energy that the game has — it has to be really, really exciting.

You get drunk with the plum juice?
Well, I get into the altered state of my own, sort of get wackier, if I drink the plum juice; it sort of has been fermented and allows me to be wackier and kookier if you possibly believe that. In some of the episodes I was working on, Globox, my character, swallows the "Dark Lum," and he makes me crave the plum juice, so, when I drink the plum juice, I am allergic to it—my character is—so that I start getting affected, start getting drunk and stuff like that (he gets hiccups) until I get saved by Rayman and stop being allergic.

Have you had any roles that prepared you to play Globox? Are there any similar characters you played?
I guess the Mario Bros. to me are the closest — there is a lot of chasing, a lot of capturing, a lot of clues and it is an

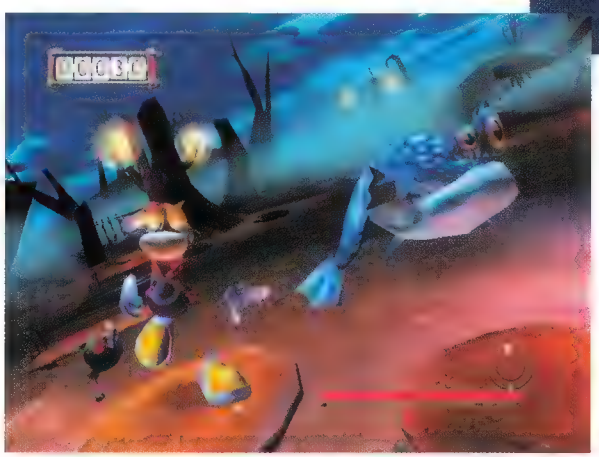
If you look closely, you can see Globox in the distance... and he's probably saying something really funny...

exciting, fun game. They have the right strategy to keep you hooked.

How are your costars? How does Rayman stack up to Nicole Kidman, for example?
He stacks up nowhere near to Nicole Kidman, she is a voluptuous, sexy woman. She is big, she is tall, and I am under six feet...well under. I am tall for my height. Well, Nicole Kidman has got legs all the way to the floor, right, and what does Rayman have? It's like the only video game where the hero has no legs, no arms, he is like an amputee.

Are there any movies that you think should be games?
There are a lot of movies that should not even be movies, let alone games, but let me see. There is "Seven," but it will be pretty brutal, it will be kind of fun to try to capture the villain in that. Or "When Harry met Sally," it's like dating video game, that could be fun, hooking up with the chick and... Sorry, I am married.

Globox or Grimace from McDonald's?
Well, look at Globox, man, he is like half-frog, half-garbage can, you step on his foot and he'd say... I think Globox would definitely immobilize him, pulverize him, and mutilate him. He looks like a half-garbage can, half-frog, and he can swallow up anything in his path. What can Grimace do? What does he do, drink soda?



Easily the most f'd-up looking character in all of gaming...and who better to bring him to life then the man behind Sid the sloth...

"Well, look at Globox, man, he is like half-frog, half-garbage can, you step on his foot and he'd say..."

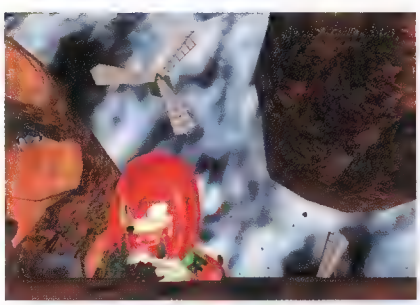
Better than its sequel, Sonic's original 3D adventure comes to GC

sonic adventure dx

the director's cut

words dave halverson

Even though it's visibly dated in terms of the integrity of its in-game models (especially Robotnik and any residual characters), there's something about Sonic Adventure that transcends technology. Is it because it was the first true 3D Sonic, or because it ushered in such an exciting era for Segaphiles? Either way, its wonderful ways are now migrating to the GameCube in the hand-me-down of the year, Sonic Adventure DX. In a similar move to Skies of Arcadia, Sonic Adventure is getting the royal treatment for debut number two, which means the buttoning up of its manic control and crazy collision, the game's only major flaws outside of its overly complex main hub. For the uninitiated, many of Sonic's levels in the game are blindingly fast, but unfortunately were almost impossible to control as a result. You found yourself just pressing up and drooling more than steering Sonic. Now you can actually affect his trajectory, even riding on the game's massive banks and narrow rails. Fixes beyond the control remain to be seen: elements such as water, ice, reflections and cinemas were still not final in our preview build, but with any luck, Cubivores will soon be privy to the Sonic Adventure we've all been waiting for since waving goodbye to our beloved Dreamcast. I'll tell you one thing: playing that first level, hearing that music, it still puts me in a very special place.



Sonic and friends have received quite a good looking make over

"I'll tell you one thing: playing that first level, hearing that music, it still puts me in a very special place."

sonic adventure dx: the director's cut

system: **gamecube** / developer: **sonic team** / publisher: **sega** / available: **summer**

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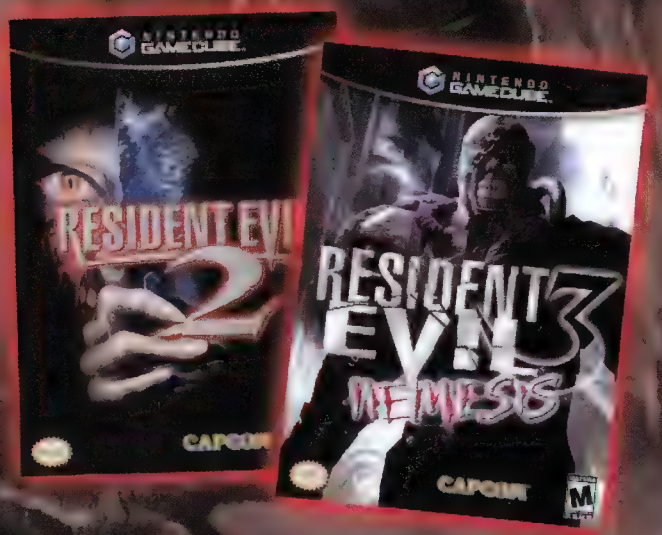

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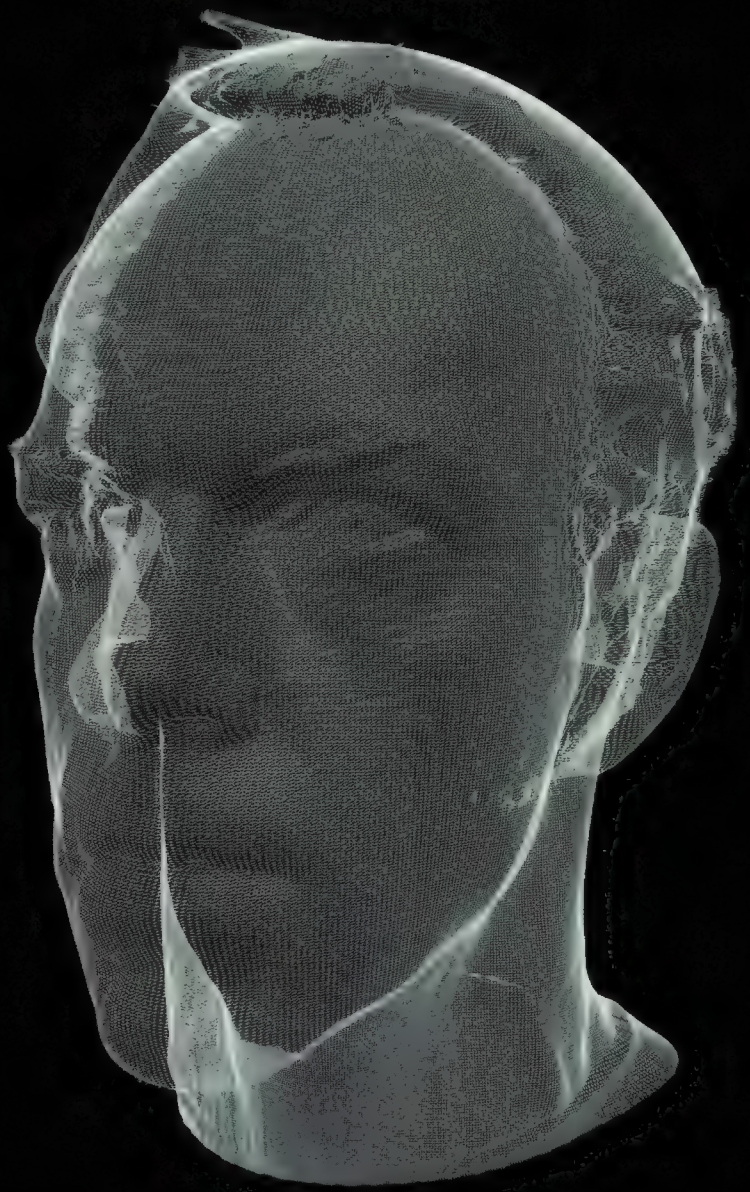
enter the matrix

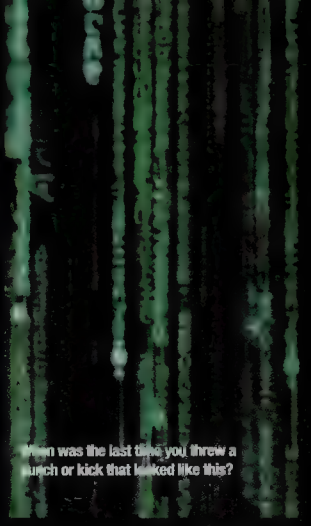


words brady fiechter

Much boasting has surrounded Enter the Matrix, a video game—*the* video game—based on the upcoming sequel to the one science fiction film that finally embraced the visual power of Japanese animation and successfully built it into a captivating live-action spectacle. It's said that the technology behind the game is radically progressive, almost more appropriate for the next wave of consoles to show just how powerful the system is, and that an hour of footage was shot on location by the Wachowski brothers to ensure that the game contains cinematic storytelling on a grand scale. It's said that ridiculous amounts of motion capture sessions were attended to, complimenting the meticulous details in the characters' facial features, and the action is stylized like the film—somersault from walls, slow the passage of time, leap from the torso of an enemy with the grace of a ballerina in low gravity. It's said that Enter the Matrix will change the way you look at movie-to-game adaptations.

Yes, much is being said about the Enter the Matrix, the hype is thick, but the frustratingly clever thing is that developers Shiny Entertainment are remaining so guarded with the game that the mystery can only continue to thicken. Its ambitions are, without question, massive, and the approach to its design breeds big possibilities. For me, the one thing that stands above all else is that, for the first time, Hollywood is intimately involved in the creation of a game. Before Shiny began laying down the game environment for Enter the Matrix, the Wachowski brothers scripted every single moment, creating extensive storyboards that visualized the directors' vivid imaginations. The story flows from their inspired pens. They have essentially been hands-on members of the team, ensuring that the game plays out exactly to their distinct specifications. And here's the kicker: the game actually links story elements with the upcoming movie, weaving scenes into the gameplay. Where other movie games interpret their big-screen inspirations, Enter the Matrix is its movie's intimate extension.

So much attention is given to the story and cinematic structuring of the game, with actors recording tons of dialogue and footage and the sequence of events playing like a film, you have to wonder where the interactivity is ultimately headed; we're still in such an infantile state when it comes to figuring out the most functional approach to marrying games with movies. For the Wachowskis and Shiny, the game part of Enter the Matrix had to include the visual extravagance of the movie's fight scenes, which translated to: we have to make it exist with bullet time without compromising the flow of the action and coming off stale and mechanical. Solution: represent this idea through what Shiny has dubbed "Focus," guiding Nobi and Ghost through the shadowy, dominatingly subterranean universe in lavishly stylized, freeze-frame sequences of blasting and close-encounter combat. Hovercraft and car chase scenes harvested from



the movie also build the gameplay experience.

Another interesting draw from the movie is the theme of hacking. At data points inside the game, you'll be able to siphon valuable information, discover secrets and engage in conversation. There's even a little advantage in your favor if you have any real-world computer skills. Mastering hacking skills isn't necessary to progress, but just another opportunity to sink deeper into the Matrix universe and gain a little advantage through, say, upgrades that can be siphoned into collection points.

It all sounds intriguing: a rumored $20-million game based on *The Matrix*, connections to the film on which it is based, glossy new technology, big-time directors forming the foundation. The moment I finally get the chance to experience parts of the game myself, Shiny talks of implementing yet something else new: imagine 1,300 Sentinels onscreen, chasing you through tunnels, forming the scene you'll see in the movie, creating an interactive thrill ride—and it's all been staged by two of Hollywood's most respected directors.

"For the first time, Hollywood is intimately involved in the creation of a game."

enter the matrix

system: all / developer: shiny / publisher: infogrames / available: may

Entering a nightmarish realm of twisted horror

silent hill 3

words brady fiechter

When a game like Silent Hill 3 comes along, it reaffirms that video games are capable of generating a consuming power. It is inspired and delirious, gruesomely and remarkably stitched together with threads of both art and technical mastery. True, the game exists in an incomplete state, revealing a limited slice of what's to come, but that haunting slice already manipulates me more immediately, more forcefully than any game I've played this past year. It could fall apart in the end, fizzling out over extended play—this is the third, initially familiar chapter—but that still would not sway my opinion of what the game already represents: designers working at the edge of their craft.

The Silent Hill series has lived in its own twisted, abstract world from the beginning, existing as more of a giant mood painting than a traditional interactive gameplay experience. So unsettlingly intoxicating is the imagery, so disturbing is its pestilent decay, that it feels as if a nightmare has been given shape and form; only the uncontrolled mind would seem capable of releasing such phantasmagoric, random trails of horror to travel. When I spoke with a few key creators of Silent Hill 3, they touched on their intentions of linking banal, ordinary settings with personal manifestations of their deepest fears. For once, talk like this seems to have revealed actual, startling results—an entirely new experience that flows from unexplained reaches.

My reaction to Silent Hill 3 is purely driven by mood and the ability of the game to crawl under my skin, yet this pervasive fog of heavy atmosphere does undeniably lift the gameplay, which, in the end, is not pressing far forward. I don't need to unload constant rounds into these dreadful monsters to be entertained; I want to feel their presence and jolt at the need to flee from them. Silent Hill 2 was criticized for lack of action; it's unfortunate that we must demand perfunctory shootouts, where no heed is paid to pacing and apprehension. This series is mystery and discovery, and I sit captivated every step I take in revealing the bizarre clues.

"My reaction to Silent Hill 3 is driven purely by mood and the ability of the game to crawl under my skin."

The locations in the game are as darkly beautiful as they are creepy.

silent hill 3

system: **ps2** / developer: **konami** / publisher: **konami** / available: **summer**

evil dead

a fistful of boomstick

words dave halverson

They're Evil, they're Dead. Check the zombie with the open skull; Eeeeww.

Boom! Here comes the Boom! Ready or not, here come the...Deadites? In a move that can only be described as...uh... smart, THQ has finally ditched the ball and chain of the adventure/horror premise and produced a good game of Evil Dead, with a little help from Bruce Campbell and VIS' fine State of Emergency engine. When a reject professor with the brain-power of a Psychic Friend accidentally unleashes the Deadites on the sleepy town of Deerborne, Ash springs back into action (well, spring may be the wrong word; he's not real thrilled about it) to seal a vortex that will take him across the familiar realms of Army of Darkness, including colonial, Civil War, modern day, and apocalyptic deathscapes.

To keep from the confines of mind numbing repetition, the game employs exploration and puzzle elements (via a to-do list and user-friendly interface) finding keys, spells, weapons, and clues to progress, as well as a spell casting system torn right from the pages of the Necrinomicon. It still pretty much boils down to find-it, kill-it and take what it drops...only with a purpose. The levels are also designed to throw zombies your way conducive with the task at hand; so if you're on your way to a key location or event, it's like a flesh festival, but if you're looking to fill your spirit gauge at level's end, you gotta work to sniff out enough dead folks.

The story is integrated nicely into the proceedings but the vast majority of Fistful of Boomstick is directed exactly where it should be: using said stick and the stump-fitted chainsaw (there are other weapons, but none as enjoyable as these) to separate limb from body, head from neck, etc. And for your splattering pleasure, VIS have everything motoring along at a steady 60 fps while adding quite a lot of extra detail to its in-game models. So, you get the satisfaction of gallons of arterial spray and multiple limbs a-flying, without sacrificing graphics; ain't life grand?

"...using said stick and the stump-fitted chainsaw (there are other weapons but none so enjoyable as these) to separate limb from body, head from neck, etc."

evil dead: a fistful of boomstick

system: **playstation 2, xbox** / developer: **vis** / publisher: thq / available: **spring**

Endless action

chaos legion

words brady fiechter

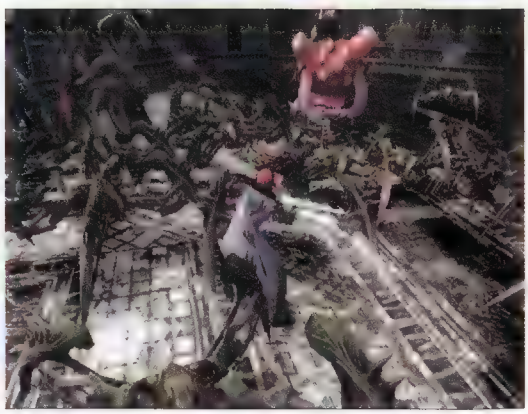
There are more slayings of giant chunky creatures in the first level of Chaos Legion alone than most straight action games pack into an entire game. Its combat is interminable, swallowing the screen with such dense, endless masses of resistance that you might find yourself refusing to blink for the sake of survival. Capcom obviously never even entertained the question, "Is there such a thing as too much?"

Waging this one-man apocalypse is Sieg Wahrhet, a frigid slice of excess style who resembles leftovers from the Dante/Devil May Cry design sessions and whose name translates to Victory Truth. He kicks and punches, jumps and strafes, stringing together basic combos with the arcane demolition powers of a nasty super-charged sword. Toward the end of the quest, a coolly animated female character joins the slaughter, packing elegant pistols and stylistically charged movements as her main offensive distinction; her spiffy scarf, trailing behind her as if caught in a deafening wind tunnel, is the perfect compliment to her mesh stockings.

She provides a nice change of pace and alteration to the general gameplay structure, but Chaos Legion almost entirely revolves around Sieg. He decides one day that he must exterminate his friend Victor Delacroix, who has decided to defy his god, rule the land, and open the gate to large spiders and lumbering giants and psychotic warriors that somehow randomly generate and spawn from lightning. While Sieg's solo creepy-creature slaying is effective, the real damage begins when the legions are unleashed. These supernaturally endowed helpers can be invoked at will, just as long as you continue to slay enough of the enemy and collect their ample spirit energy. Experience is gained depending on your technique and efficiency with attacks, building into the millions for dispersion to whichever warrior you want to enhance to your liking. Tons of items discarded from fallen foes also work towards building experience and providing special tools for the strike.

With the relentless action working front and center, Chaos Legion's presentation has been kept minimalistically grounded, mixing gothic rot with frosty fantasy that makes everything look very much like a paint-by-numbers video game. It's been constructed to accommodate a very specific, very rigid gameplay path, with invisible walls and blocky level construction marring its appeal. Maybe Chaos Legion worked five years ago, but if the final version remains unchanged, not today.

"With the relentless action working front and center, Chaos Legion's presentation has been kept minimalistically grounded."



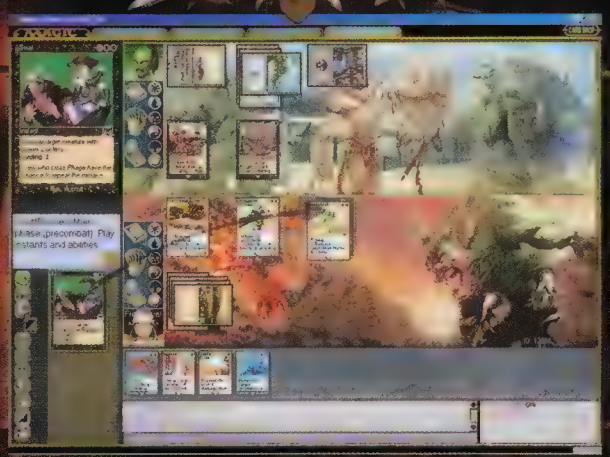
The action never, ever stops in Chaos Legion

chaos legion

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom** / available: **summer**

ALGOPHOBIA

Legions



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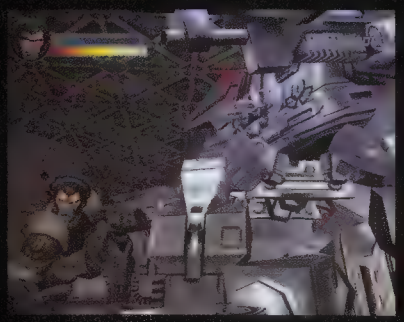


Marvel at it

x2 wolverine's revenge

words dave halverson

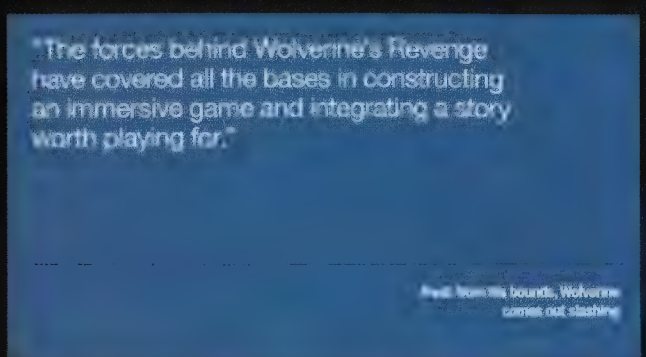
I went to buy a copy of X-Men 1.5 the other day and it was sold out (at Best Buy no less, where they stock hundreds), and when I went to see *Daredevil* (loved it) the *X2* preview actually received applause. In other words, the X-Men are not only back, they're bigger then ever.

Nevertheless, how does one create a Wolverine game capable of capitalizing on Hugh Jackman's mannish mutant and not lose the comic book appeal of the more-mutated muscle-bound maniac in yellow spandex? Activision and Genepool have chosen what seems the logical course by incorporating elements of both into their lead freak, then dropping him into an adventure that seeks to break free from the same-same of straight X-Men action (Lord knows we've had enough of that) and forge a game with an emphasis on stealth, exploration, action, and especially mutant powers.

Wolverine's goal is to find the antidote for the X-Virus within 48 hours... and it's for him. Breaking Wolvie free from his bonds, the game covers the ground immediately following his lovely Canadian vacation, so he's plenty pissed and rigged with all the right stuff for his bloody revenge, namely an indestructible skeleton and retractable claws (great for cutting though slow moving traffic at the mall, I'm sure). Of course, whenever possible it's best for him to remain a silent assassin, making way for the game's ultra-cool-looking stealth mode which allows him to see traps and the best way in which to stealth-kill nearby prey—a lovely sight to behold. He can also unleash one-hit kills and fury attacks in battle, as well as perform a series of moves and evasion techniques. Archenemies in the game include Sabretooth, Wendigo, Juggernaut, Omega Red and Magneto, but Wolvie is not alone. He can telepathically connect with Beast and Colossus in certain attack situations and with Charles Xavier for valuable intel.

The forces behind Wolverine's Revenge have covered all of the bases in constructing an immersive game and integrating a story worth playing for, going as far as recruiting Mark Hamill and Patrick Stewart to bring off the script penned by comics legend Larry Hama. As the final tweaking stages begin, here's hoping they tune it just right before unleashing it on what is sure to be a massive fan base across every major platform.

"The forces behind Wolverine's Revenge have covered all the bases in constructing an immersive game and integrating a story worth playing for."



x2: wolverine's revenge

system: **xbox, ps2, gc, pc** / developer: **genepool/warthog** / publisher: **activision** / available: **april 2003**

From the trailer park to you...

big mutha truckers

words dave halverson

Beware of bad-ass biker gangs. They don't take kindly to the taste of pavement

Whether you're looking for a good place to drop a load (and who isn't?) or just have a hankering for something on the backwoods side of gaming, Empire Interactive bravely brings you Big Mutha Truckers, a hick racing smorgasbord/Springer casting call steeped in good ol' boy humor and sexual innuendo. If George Bush had a PS2 (he'd need a brain too) this game would likely supersede his warrin' ways and get him back to the task of obliterating the US economy. But I digress. If you're thinking this is some half-assed gimmick meant to spark your residual Daisy Duke fantasy, think again. The developer behind BMT, Eutechnyx, has first and foremost created the single best semi-trucking game to ever hit the highways. This is a serious engine, packed with serious gameplay. From the visuals to the physics, whether you reside behind the wheel or behind the truck, BMT's best bits are on the road, as it should be; not to take anything away from the story elements which…well, how much time do you have?

Big Momma Jackson—a charmer of a woman (if you like pit hair and saddlebags) is fixin' to retire, and since none of her loved ones wants the business, she's decided to give it to one of her four wretched offspring, namely the one that can hit the road and earn the most cash in 60 days to buy it from her. So it's off to the select screen you go to view the litter and make your selection. Will it be the slut, ignoramus, pig, or swindler…or as they like to call them, Bobbie Sue, Cletis, Earl, or Rawkus? Now imagine GTA without getting out of the car and you're half way to Dixie.

Pulling into each charming locale, ranging from cities to coal mines and everything in between, you gas-up, repair, and enhance your rig in the garage, buy and sell loads in the store, and gather valuable intelligence (if you can call it that) or take on the odd mission in the bar. You can also take out loans and play the slots. The idea is to buy low and sell high as you're tipped off to who needs what where, and then hit the road where the real hazards await, along with story arcs and, of course, traffic. Run over a biker and the cast of *Easy Rider* is on your ass, pulling beside you and hopping on with bad intentions; you gotta knock 'em off or pay the price. No use calling the poe-lice either, as they is crooked as a dog's hind leg…and so it goes. For your listening pleasure you can dial up four radio stations to surrender your brain cells to: K-Rok, featuring, among others, Deep Purple and Steppenwolf; Yeehaw...er, figure it out; Space 108, with Dirty Vegas, Technique, and Candice; and MC Escher, featuring Stereo MCs.

Whether or not you buy into the whole crossbred, trailer-park trash, Middle American pie, it must be said that Big Mutha Truckers is a solid, well-produced driving adventure game. I only wish the out-of-vehicle character models were better. Seeing as how few polys are being moved around (the shops are static), the innards of the game should be more pleasing to the eye. Euthecnyx's strengths are definitely on the road. But hey, if you're looking for something different, or need a game that'll go nicely with your Kid Rock collection, this is your Mother Trucker.

big mutha truckers

system: **playstation 2, xbox, pc** / developer: **eutechnyx** / publisher: **empire interactive** / available: **spring**

Top-down glory

dungeons & dragons: heroes

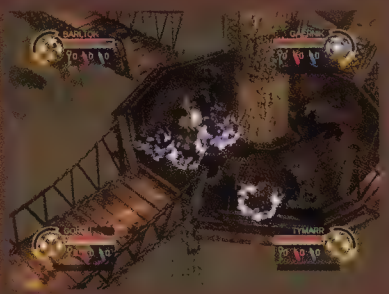
words dave halverson

Those once threatened by the mere utterance of D&D, fraught with visions of card tables and comic book shops, may finally have their day in the top-down sun; Dungeons & Dragons Heroes is an action game. Even comparisons to Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance are unfounded. You begin the game (as Cleric, Wizard, Fighter or Rogue) with your indigenous weapon and, as you assail the game's traps and fiends, watch it evolve from a mere hunk of matter to a living weapon of mass destruction. Aside from that miniscule bit of role-playing fodder, attributes are dispersed, but otherwise, it's just you and up to four friends (together on one screen) vs. demon hordes, progressively more devious labyrinths, and of course guardians: big, malformed, blood-thirsty bosses. Surprised? We certainly were. As the producer demo'd the game we kept spurting out the requisite queries: does it have a town? "Nope." An equip screen? "Nope, it's pure action." What about a warrior goddess in her underwear... no? You'd better add that quick. Whether or not the pure action stance will bode well for the franchise remains to be seen. Of course, we couldn't be happier. The story, played out within the gamescape and through impressive cinemas, is well scripted and acted, providing all the lore you need, setting the stage for the action to speak louder than the words.

Visually the game is going to deliver, no doubt about it, and the fully orchestrated score is spectacular. While many of the key effects were missing from the version we played, we were assured that they won't disappoint, yet the water will admittedly fall short of Dark Alliance's (by how much, though, we don't know). The detail, level design, traps, and especially the models, however, aim to please, especially the models, which include the single best Cleric to ever plunge warhammer into bone.

All the elements needed to mold Heroes into a top-down actioner to be reckoned with are in place; it's now up to the team to take the remaining months and tweak the AI and difficulty to perfection, elevating it from a garden-variety hack-n-slash to a methodical, intelligently laid adventure. We can hardly wait to see if they pull it off.

"It's just you and up to four friends vs. demon hordes, progressively more devious labyrinths, and of course guardians: big, malformed, blood-thirsty bosses."



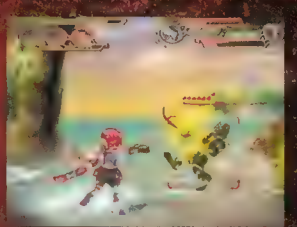
dungeon & dragons heroes

system: **xbox, ps2, gc** / developer: **infogrames** / publisher: **infogrames** / available: **june**

Dark Cloud 2

Take the first step in the sequel to one of the most epic quests ever. Dark Cloud 2. Create weapons. Invent gadgets. Restore the future by rebuilding the past with an enhanced Georama system that puts the fate of the world in your hands. Customize homes, surroundings and towns with virtually infinite possibilities, then see how they affect the future. But beware: Every action has a consequence.

PlayStation 2



TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Violence

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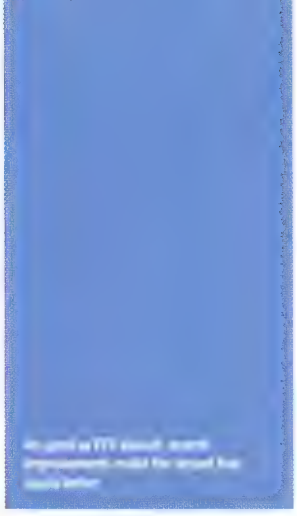
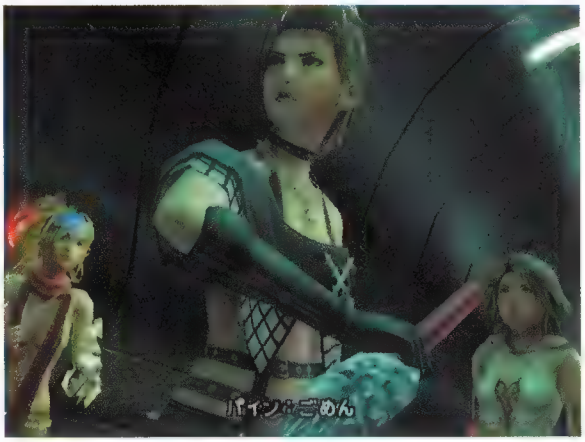
The never-ending fantasy...

final fantasy X

words brady fiechter





a return to Active mode, with an effort to increase the pacing and functionality of confrontations. It's not clear exactly how the more dynamic battle system will play out; Square is concentrating on providing quite a few changes to what we've become accustomed to. Gunner, Mascot, Gambler and the odd-sounding Pop Star comprise the new job classes, which are utilized through the Job Wheel, a system lifted out of Final Fantasy Tactics. With the use of the Sphere Plate, party members can switch job classes during battle.

It's hard to imagine Final Fantasy X-2 deviating too far from the FF formula—uncompromising fans like to digest familiarity—but Square has consistently alluded to truly moving the series in a unique direction. Yuna demonstrates a lot more agility than what is expected in the series, jumping, climbing and running through her majestic world with the skill of an action heroine. Whatever changes are being made, radical or not, in the end it probably won't matter and you'll come away from Final Fantasy X-2, like a devoted follower of the series always does, having experienced towering gamemaking.

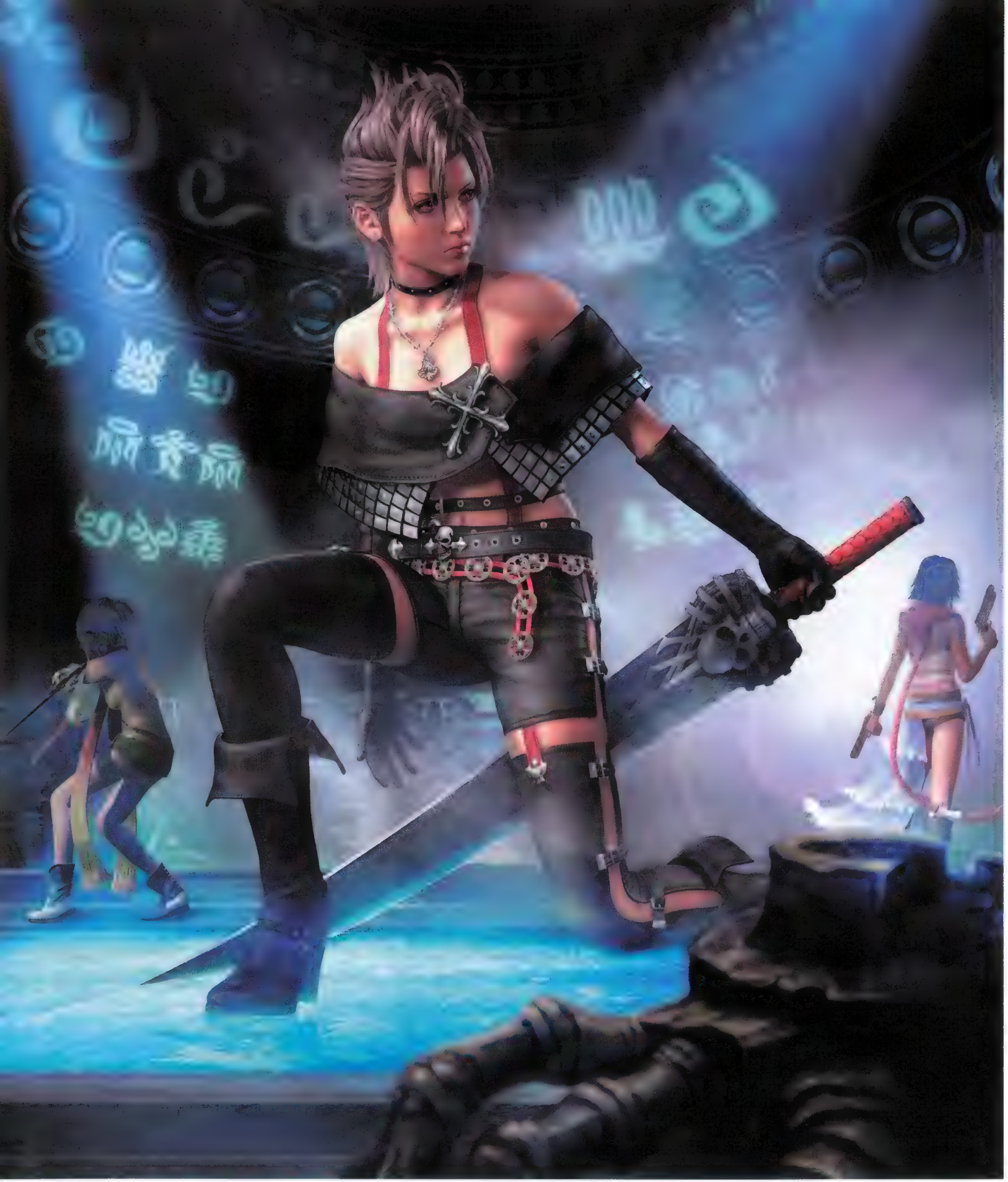
"...Final Fantasy plants its seed and strikes like a religion; you either believe or you don't."

job class transformation system

It certainly would not be a new Final Fantasy game without some new systems to wrap your head around, and X-2 is no different. This time, we've got the job class transformation, or "Dress Up" system. Basically, this allows players to change character class within battle. You could change from a magician to a knight, and thief to a gunner, and so on. Each transformation culminates in a new set of clothes, a new set of skills, and a new repetoire of animation. This system will add a new dimension of strategy to FF X-2's already solid and quick combat engine.

During battle, you can change the class of your character, which alters your appearance, skill set, and animation routines. Just choose "Dress Up."

Presto. Yuna changes class in a flurry of wonderful Square graphical overkill. Marvel at all the pretty sparkles!



final fantasy x-2

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **square** / publisher: **square ea** / available: **may**

sudeki

interview

Lead Designer Thomas Pirinen whets our apetite. It's time to start getting excited about Sudeki

interview by dave halverson

play: Developing the first RPG brand for the Xbox is no small task. What type of research did you do going into Sudeki's development?
Thomas Pirinen: We built the cultures and the background stories of the game worlds from scratch after studying several real-world cultures across the globe. We tried to give each of our three game worlds a unique flavor and distinct character in order to bring our world more alive. We did not simply copy the standard D and D setting, but instead created an industrial fantasy world where both magic and technology have a place.

All the characters, monsters and locations were painstakingly concepted and hand-crafted by the artists in order to avoid an overly generic look to our levels. The artistic look and feel of the game is tremendously important to us, and we have placed a lot of emphasis on lighting, color schemes and architecture of our locations. We have amazing artists and developers with extensive experience working on RPGs, including work for Square.

What do you feel is missing and/or flawed about traditional role-playing games that you might address with the power of Xbox?
The combat system has always been the Achilles' heel of RPGs. While turn-based combat offers you lots of depth and options, this has already been done to death in the other RPG series. Right from the start we wanted to do our combat, including all the spells and special attacks, in real-time, without using a separate screen as a cop-out.
Technically, the biggest difference has been the sheer power of the Xbox: we can push a huge number of polygons and put a huge number of enemies onscreen at once.

What RPGs, if any, inspired Sudeki's development?
The classic RPG Secret of Mana was a big influence, as was Star Ocean 2 with its hectic combat. Whilst not traditional RPGs, games like Devil May Cry, Onimusha 2 and Dynasty Warriors 2 and 3 were influential when we were developing our combat system.

Sudeki seems to be rooted in Japanese design (!). Can you elaborate on the game's look?
Our lead concept artist is a huge fan of Japanese manga and anime and I think this has had a very positive influence in establishing the visual look of the game, but we also have an ex-*2000 AD* artist doing a lot of our concept artwork. So it is really a mixture of styles, rather than following Japanese or Western art style slavishly. Lots of our monsters are quite fierce compared to most of the cutesy Japanese games, so we have not been afraid to mix it up to achieve our own style.

What type of new systems will the game employ in terms of commerce and battle?
Instead of all monsters just walking around with pouches of gold (where does a giant spider keep it all anyway?), you can pick up the pelts and hides of the monsters for example, and sell them in shops. A wise player will not sell the hide of a wolf he has just killed in the nearest village where it will not fetch a good price, but will take it with him to a more distant place where it fetches a higher price.

Combat is based on a blend of real-time fighting and tactical decisions to use skills, items and spells. AI settings, which the player can configure, control the rest of the

"The combat system has always been the Achilles' heel of RPGs. While turn-based combat offers you lots of depth and options, this has already been done to death in the other RPG series."

As the Xbox enters its second generation... well, just have a look. Ain't it grand?

player's characters while he or she concentrates on guiding one of the party members, though you are allowed to swap at any time. When controlling a character you can unleash a flurry of moves like in a beat-'em-up game with combinations of blocks and light and heavy attacks. When you want to use items, spells or special skills, you can open up a shortcut menu and the game will slow down, allowing you to make these tactical decisions at your own pace, but still under time pressure.

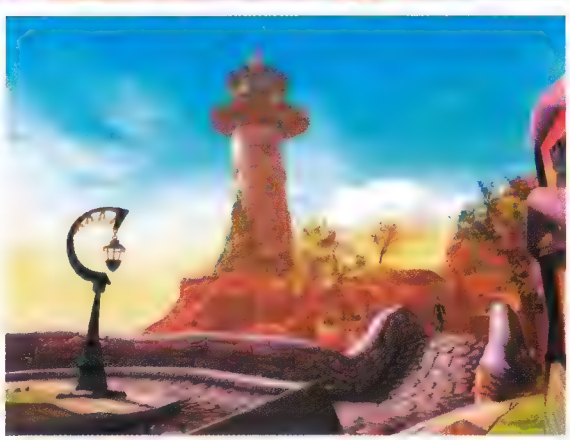
The skills and magic of the game range from combat skills that allow players to dish out tons of damage, to more subtle spells that boost a character's speed or lower the enemy's defenses. When you are using these skills, your character still moves at full speed while the enemies move in slow motion, allowing you to really crush your foes with a flurry of blows.

What about sound? What sort of soundtrack are you aiming for?

This is from Tom Colvin and Eamon Murtagh, who are responsible for our music and sound: Sudeki features a detailed sound design that heightens the gameplay experience at every turn. Both the music and the sound effects are dynamic and interactive. Sudeki's soundtrack accurately reflects your character's situation at all times, and it takes into account your current location, what you are doing and what is happening around you.

In terms of style, Sudeki has a fresh contemporary feel without losing sight of the traditional cinematic style that is required to tell such an epic story. We think people will be pleasantly surprised. Initial reactions have been excellent!

Sudeki will definitely be the sort of game that tempts you to turn the sound up rather than off when you play.



Real-time battles with turned-base trimmings and awesome fx adorn the game's gorgeous battles

sudeki

system: **xbox** / developer: **climax** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **q3**

deus ex 2 invisible war

The sequel to the critically acclaimed PC first-person action-adventure Deus Ex pushes the boundaries of technology and ambitious game design

words brady fiechter

"...for the first time, players will be able to create their own darkness in which to hide..."

You've survived the elements deep in the heart of Antarctica, making it past the security bots by stealthily circumventing their patrol path, penetrating the shadowy complex without a shot fired. You've chosen to modify your weapon to dissolve the chemical bonds in glass, enabling you to reach areas without making a noise that might disturb the watchful enemy and their sensitive equipment. Your exploits take you across the globe—Seattle, Cairo, Chicago, Germany—each setting revealing fractions of truth into your reason for risking your life to bring hope back to a dystopic society. Perhaps Silas Archer, who runs a school for the gifted in this future of artificial enhanced humans, holds the key to what you seek. But to find him, you must finish your current mission, perhaps deciding on the aggressive, kill-all approach. Assessing the situation, a grenade seems a much better idea than the flame thrower, so you clear the room with two explosions, the percussions from the blast shattering glass, tossing around cans and furniture. The light fixtures won't stop swinging, throwing shadows across the room in such a way that the presence of the setting becomes palpable.

In a time when video games are becoming less a game and more an escape into another place, Deus Ex 2: Invisible War strives to be the model for this next tier of virtual realities. You command unparalleled control over whom you speak with, of how you approach conversations and tense circumstances; storytelling is a big part of the experience, with thousands of lines of conversation propelling the events. The world unfolds according to your personal decisions, where a choice to, say, assassinate instead of interrogate can bring entirely unique consequences.

"The challenge with a game like this," explains project director Harvey Smith, "is bringing all this complex story stuff together in a package that doesn't bore action gamers. Again, we are always trying to have the best of both worlds."

One of the most compelling aspects of Deus Ex 2, for me, is a chance to be intimately engaged in one of the most extensive plots yet in a first-person adventure. But here again is where the game does not shackle you to a rigid path.

"A huge part of the game is that you can power yourself up in two different directions," continues Smith. "Two people can start the game and end up with characters that have radically different combinations of powers. In this game, you play Alex D, who can be male or female, and we fully supported all the thousands of voice lines and conversations for both male and female. It was very costly, and we've taken a lot of flak for it, but in the end it's going to pay off for the player."

Within the story's themed core of artificial enhancements meant to elevate the depressive society to a much higher way of living stems the ability for humans to manipulate themselves with mechanical treatments and nanotechnology.

"So your entire body has binary slots: say you install something in your eye, you can make either a spy drone work from your eye, or you can turn on some sort of night vision. And every bio mod has three tiers of functionality. The first one might be the night vision, the second might be partial see-through walls, and the third might allow you to see entirely through walls, [spotting] both organic and robotic targets. There's even a black market in the game, they're kind of screwed up and evil... With the help leach, for instance, you launch a drone, it coalesces out of air, and it floats around you, orbits around you looking for corpses or unconscious bodies; it breaks them down and uses the cellular material to heal you."

Another interesting example is bot domination: possess mechanical beings and take over their bodies and you might engage in conversations for clues, learn codes or just enjoy their strength for some major destruction.

How all this plays out will, in the confident words of everyone involved in Invisible War, take you to a new feeling of immersion. Merely looking at the game is enough to accept what they say as undisputed fact: the lighting, the way everything seems to take up true space and react with actual presence, is visual mastery. "Other games are faking this kind of lighting, and they say, 'Look at our shadows, look at how cool the shadow is on the ground as the character moves around.' We ain't faking," boast studio head Warren Spector. "For a lot of other studios, dynamic shadows and real volumetric shadows are pretty pictures, and they make the game look really cool and really nice, but for us it's gameplay, and for the first time, players will be able to create their own darkness in which to hide, and the AI and everything else is tuned

to support that sort of gameplay. So you're not just playing a shooter in a scary, cool-looking place with real lighting, you're also playing a stealth game where you're in control of the lighting in a lot of cases, and the AI is tuned to notice the light is changing. And again, it's almost impossible to believe every light is dynamic. It's insane."

Indeed, the effect is awesome. "Ultimately—and I don't think it's arrogance to say—eventually pretty much every game is going to have lighting like this," continues Spector. "Three years from now, four years from now, this won't be a selling point. But for now, it's pretty special stuff."

For all its technical prowess, the blending of spirited sci-fi settings and slick inhabitants with dynamic presentation, the ambition to create a visual powerhouse does not end as a cool picture. "Every object we put into the game, we try to tie some gameplay to it," Smith points out. "There are biomods, like an environmental biomod, that allow you to survive in toxic environments. So you can be a guy who goes into a room with your pistol, shoots four gas barrels so the room is nice and green and deadly, and then lead enemies into the room and watch them chock to death. You're immune, cuz you've got the biomod. That's not scripted, that's not planned; you can literally pick the barrels up and move them where you want."

Key here is "not scripted," "not planned." Deus Ex 2 does not want to feel rigid or controlled, a typical gaming experience where most every action is dictated by the strings of the puppet-master gamemaker. Its world reacts to your actions as you might expect: dump over a waste basket or tamper with a gate and a cleaner bot takes care of the disruption; say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, and someone will pay the price, the repercussions may surface hours down the line.

"We're not trying to impose our will on you," says Smith. "It's your world to live in."

The level of detail is remarkable, but you absolutely have to see it moving to appreciate the lighting

deus ex 2: invisible war

system: **xbox, pc** / developer: **ion storm** / publisher: **eidos** / available: **june**

Juju's bizarre adventure

tak
and the power of juju

words tom ham

When we first heard about Tak over a year ago, we were intrigued to say the least. A brand new video-game character first, to become a Nickelodeon property second? A 3D adventure set in an ancient tribal world? Since the initial announcement, mum has been the word as THQ managed to keep Tak a secret until its official unveiling in Las Vegas this past February.

Tak and the Power of Juju tells the story of Tak, a young shaman's apprentice who is on a quest to recover five moonstones stolen from the Moon Juju. You see, ever since the evil Juju-man took them, she has been powerless. In a true tale of good vs. evil, Tak must venture through numerous obstacles and face countless foes as he uses his voodoo to defeat the evil Juju-man and restore peace to this world. Sounds generic, but… "We actually started concept for Tak about seven years ago," explains John Blackburn, president of Avalanche Software. "It was pretty slow going at first because we would work on the idea in our spare time between projects. We had the idea for a voodoo-based game where the lead character was a medicine man. We had all of the artists in the company draw up a few sketches so we could choose a direction. One artist made a little comic strip that he called the 'Witch Doctor Auditions.' The character that eventually became Tak was standing in the middle of a lineup of characters waiting to get into a hut. Everybody who saw the sketch was always drawn to that character immediately, so the choice was easy."

What's cool about this unique platformer is how players will have to use the environment to progress through the game. Sure there will be puzzles in the game, but the developers are hoping to make players think in a different way. "We are shooting for an even combination of puzzle and action," continues Blackburn. "I do feel that it is necessary to say that we have a different definition of the word 'puzzle' than many other platform games, which may skew players' perceptions. Many of our puzzles contain action elements in them as well. Often, it is not enough just to figure out how to solve the puzzle, but you have to be a skilled enough player to execute the solution. Sometimes this causes players to view a puzzle as bigger than it actually is. Right now we are working to balance these two mechanics in the game. Initially we felt that some of our levels were too puzzle heavy, so we have tried to add a few more action elements in to increase the pace of gameplay."

Since the game has connections to the mystical world, Tak will utilize special Juju powers and power-ups throughout the game. These special abilities will be made available to Tak when he appeases the Juju Gods, and some of these Juju Powers are downright hysterical. For example, when Tak goes into flying mode, he wears a chicken suit, so, while he is gliding in the air, he can lay eggs which double as bombs (okay, so it looks funnier than it sounds). Parody is part of what sets Tak apart from similar games in the genre.

"Juju magic in the game takes many forms," explains Blackburn. "The first of these is the Juju gods themselves. Tak's tribe believes in Juju gods. These gods actually interact with the tribe through the shaman of each village. Tak is an apprentice to one of these shaman. The shaman can call the Jujus down to specific shrines in the world to get help

"From a graphical standpoint, Tak and the Power of Juju is truly wonderous...the levels are absolutely huge and extremely well textured."

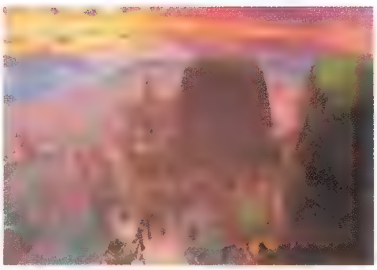
Rich colors abound in this prehistoric romp, as do funny chicken suits.

from them. Tak eventually gains this power in the game. The second main way that Tak uses magic is through the acquisition of Juju powers. These powers range from combat power-ups to spells and abilities that increase Tak's powers. In the beginning of the game, many of the magical Juju elements are hidden from Tak, but as he progresses, he develops a kind of 'Juju vision' that allows him to see more of the Juju elements in the world. As he begins to perceive more Juju elements, he can interact with these elements and increase his own Juju power."

Another cool element is the use of weapons or, in some cases, tools. "Tak has two primary tools: his blowgun and his spirit rattle," Blackburn explains. The blowgun is cool because it has two distinct purposes: a ranged attack as well as a pole-vaulting mechanism. We like the blowgun because it tightly integrates two features into one item. The spirit rattle, on the other hand, is used as a melee weapon and also as a way to invoke Juju magic."

From a graphical standpoint, Tak and the Power of Juju is truly wondrous. The visuals have a distinct look and feel and the levels we played were absolutely huge and extremely well textured. Some may argue that the graphics are a bit too cartoony, but keep in mind Nickelodeon is working in setting a new precedent. Moreover, if you're thinking Tak is strictly kids stuff, think again. "We are definitely creating a game for more seasoned gamers," says Blackburn. "The world that Tak lives in is suitable for a younger TV audience, but the puzzles in the game have been developed for an older audience. Right now we are more concerned that our game is too hard. There are many of the puzzle elements in the game that new players cannot determine how to solve. We are hoping that through the right amount of play balancing and information given to the player in the earlier levels, that players will feel challenged, but not frustrated."

After spending some time with Tak, we came away pleasantly surprised. Not only is this easily the best platformer THQ has ever offered, but it may be their best game to date, period, and they know it. "The quirky sense of style in the product is what I'm most proud of," concludes Blackburn. "It has taken a ton of work on every front to give the product the unique style that it has, from the artwork to the animation to the design of the levels. We are really starting to feel like the game has a certain something that is appealing. Watching players' reactions to what we have created is very fulfilling. Most games don't cause people to laugh out loud, but there are many times in our game that players do. It is a great feeling to know that the player is entertained by what we have created."



tak and the power of juju

system: **playstation 2, gamecube** / developer: **avalanche software** / publisher: **thq** / available: **fall**

state of emergency

interview by dave halverson

The game that set the standard for over-the-top bludgeoning is finally making its Xbox debut, but don't expect a carbon copy of the PS2 game pushed out the door to rake in some extra bones... Not only is the new State packed with meaty new features, but it's priced to move (fast) at 20 bucks! Time to say hello to Spanky and Libra all over again! Here's the lowdown on all the fun new ways to go ape-shit, right from the horses mouth...

Allison Wilson / Producer
Craig Hunter / Head of Production
Richard Reavy / Head of Research and Development
Jamie Bryan / Director

play: After the success of State Of Emergency on PS2, did you immediately decide to bring it to Xbox?
Craig Hunter: The capabilities of the Xbox system are able to handle more action on-screen than the PS2, as well as make the graphics brighter and more fluid. Since State Of Emergency had so much going on on-screen at any one time, it made sense to maximize this by bringing the game to the Xbox.
Rather than create the same game as the PS2, we wanted to add something new and different to the Xbox version. Multiplayer modes are ideal — we knew that the game was crying out for this. Playing against other opponents is so much fun — we knew that being able to cause mayhem with other people would take the game to the next level.

Allison Wilson: Our goals were to first build on the features that made State Of Emergency a successful PS2 title, look at what people liked and disliked, and take advantage of the Xbox system's engine to make the riots more impressive, more colorful and more enjoyable for the fans. One thing the Xbox version allowed us to do was to create four incredibly fun multiplayer modes. Playing State Of Emergency with three of your mates makes for a really insane time.

What new gameplay modes have you added?
Allison Wilson: With pummeling each other in mind, we added Chaos, Last Clone Standing, Deathmatch and Survivor as multiplayer modes.
Survivor is a really intense experience from the start, and with every man, woman, and genetically modified clone trying to kill you, you're lucky if you survive more than 60 seconds. Really.
Deathmatch is an all-together new experience, allowing you to recruit civilians to be in your gang and fight with you to the death. You can recruit up to 50 civilians to be in your gang and beat your opponents so you don't even get a scratch. There is nothing like running around a corner into 50 members of your enemy's posse with guns blazing.
Chaos is great because you have to try and stop the other players from getting points; go for score in this mode.
It's another every-man-for-himself experience. In Chaos, you must remember that if you kill your opponent — then he can't get points, get the hint? Also, it has that classic arcade feel where you just want the high score.
Last Clone Standing allows you to play with or against your mates. You can team up with each other to kill the clones, or make it competitive to see who can get the most genetically modified corporation goons.

Were there ideas you had for the game that were only possible to achieve with the Xbox?
Richard Reavy: The Xbox is a very user-friendly console to develop for. Because it has an integrated hard disk and network system, getting programs up and running is fairly straightforward. The Xbox's power allowed us to get a better frame rate and really polish the look of the game. One of the main ideas we had that suited the Xbox system was the four-player modes. Since the Xbox has support for four controllers standard, this was something that we really wanted to exploit, and this adds such a new dimension of fun to the game.

"Rather than create the same game as the PS2, we wanted to add something new and different to the Xbox version. Multiplayer modes are ideal — we knew that the game was crying out for this."

We noticed the characters seem to look a lot better...
Jamie Bryan: A lot of time was spent on perfecting the player's moves. We wanted to give the characters loads of personality so the player feels like they actually are the character they are playing.
Each of the five characters has two special moves that fit their personality — for example, Bull, the big guy, can take an opponent and swing him around his head before flinging him into a wall. The characters can also do dash attacks. Phreak, the computer hacker, will do a break dance kind of move to knock enemies, sweep them off their feet; while Spanky, the ex-gang member, does the meanest flip you will ever see to bash his enemies to the ground.

We also spent a lot of time on the NPCs — some of them will cower in fear and some will fight back. If you can get a gang member to follow you to a member of the Corporation, they will fight each other while you walk away quietly.

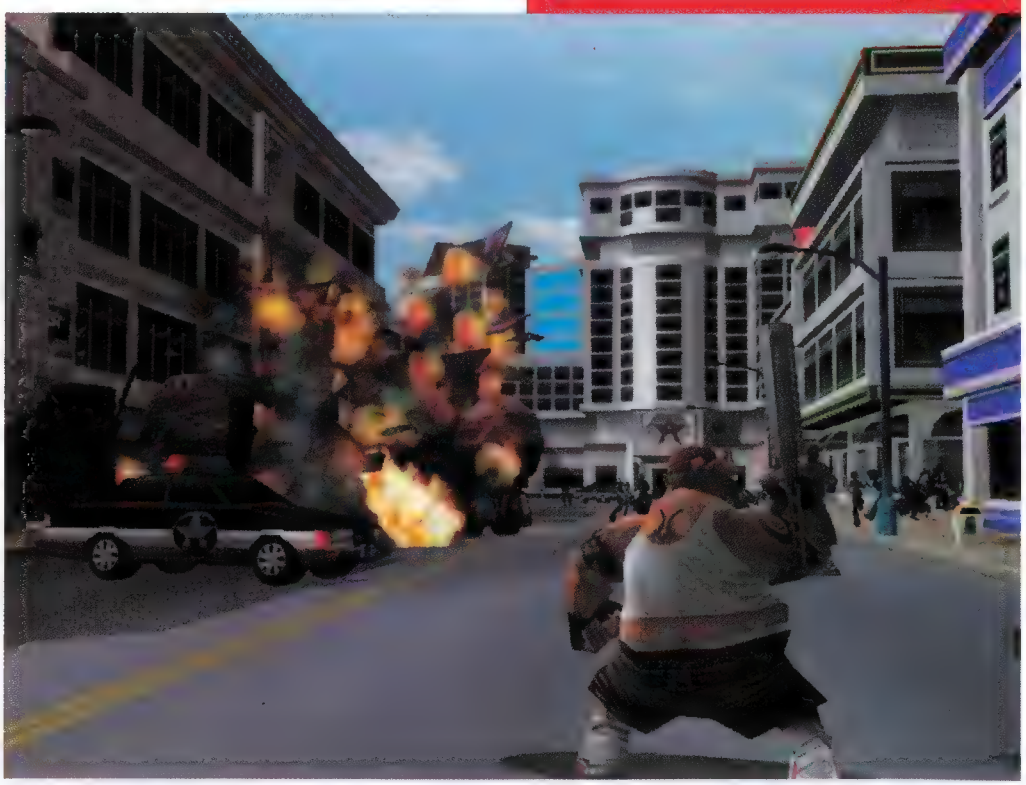
What's about the new gang leaders? Can you elaborate on how they effect game?
Jamie Bryan: It made fighting the gangs much more personal and gave more life to the gangs. Having a unique Boss character added to the atmosphere of the fight as well as gave the gangs an added unique personality. Gang leaders also helped tighten the story in the revolution mode making the game more cohesive and giving the player a key enemy or ally.

So you can use gangs to your advantage in gameplay...
Jamie Bryan: Hell yeah! You can lead gang members to fight other enemies or members of the Corporation. A gang member can take a swing at you and miss, hitting someone else in another gang, starting a full-on riot, you can just walk away from the mayhem you've just caused and continue with your objective.
In the Deathmatch multiplayer mode, you can recruit civilians to be in your gang that will fight for you to the death.

How do the new power-ups work? Which is nastiest?
Jamie Bryan:Power-ups are used to give the player a reward for completing the last stages of the level. There are specific missions to get the best use from the power-ups. For example, in Deathmatch mode, the power-ups help your gangs with weapon upgrades, making them more powerful.
The five power-ups for State Of Emergency range from standards like body armor, protecting you temporarily from damage, and infinite ammo, to ones that are a little more unusual, like punch decapitate, which gives you deadly punches, and helper power-ups that give you another member of the revolution to protect you while you're on your mission.

So, you can rip CDs to the Xbox's hard drive...Any favorites?
Craig Hunter: Anything by Britney Spears gives me the urge to inflict pain and violence, whilst leaving a pleasant image in the mind.

Spanky gets into the grenade launcher big time



state of emergency
system: **xbox** / developer: **vis, dunfermline studio** / publisher: **rockstar** / available: **summer**

Alter Echo

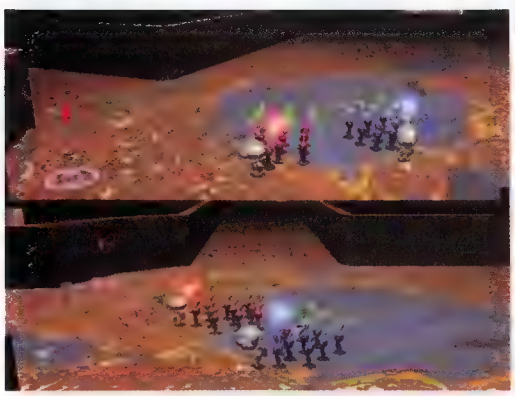
[illegible]

No one should be beat this month looking for Alter Echo. This unique action-adventure from Outrage Games and THQ could be the sleeper hit of '03. The game features a variety of unique play mechanics like morphing and body control and an interesting story. Read review right through the conclusion.

Kirby's Air Ride

[illegible]

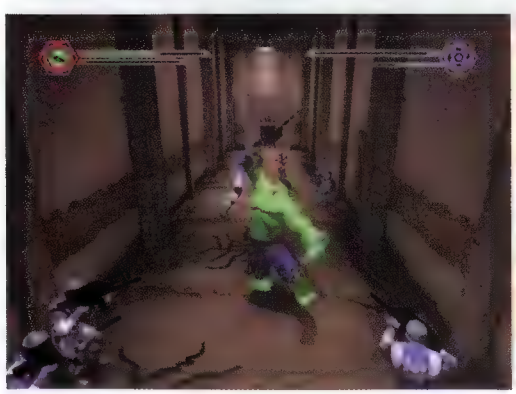
Kirby is the most famous pink puff ball ever to grace a video game. Those words could be used to describe his appearance and lovable personality as well. Now it's his debut on the GameCube and everything we love is returned and then some. Read review to learn why Kirby Air Ride is a must have for the GameCube.



Pikmin 2

[illegible]

Mario Miyamoto lost his job at Nintendo and was kicked out of the garden again ... although this time it appears he brought a friend. Two Olimars? Looks like this one may have stayed on his home planet and is obviously suspicious of the Pikmin. Yes, Pikmin 2 does indeed exist!



The Hulk

[illegible]

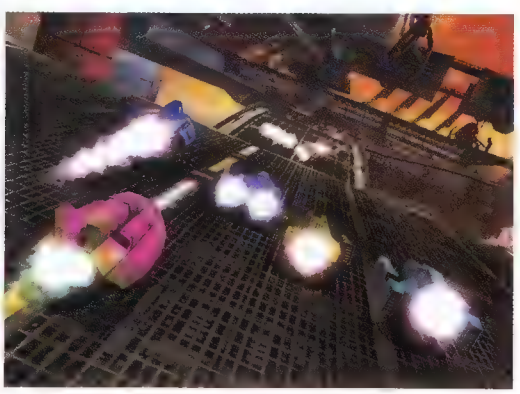
It has finally arrived! The game Marvel and fans from all over the world have been waiting for. The Hulk promises to be a unique experience in combining unique gameplay with a compelling storyline. Read review to find out if the game lives up to the hype.

ape escape 2

Burnout 2

Lost Kingdoms 2

F Zero GC

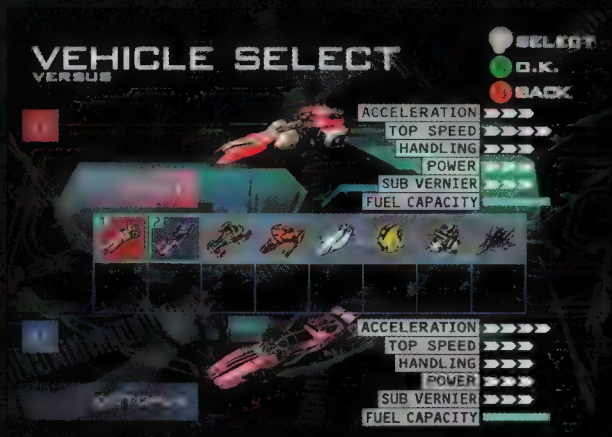


The house that Bonk built makes its triumphant return

tube slider

the champion of future formula

words dave halverson



NEC's re-emergence into the world of gaming couldn't have come at a better time. In the wake of too many vanilla genres and three powerful game systems, their traditionally exotic Japanese ilk is like a breath of fresh exhaust fumes. Their first game back, Tube Slider (insert sexual pun here), jumps directly to the head of the GameCube racing class, placing itself firmly in the pole position waiting for F-Zero to take it on. As you've probably guessed, the game takes place racing through a network of tubes of various twists and shapes, but it does so incorporating every last nuance needed to make a futuristic racer glisten. With attributes distributed between acceleration, top speed, handling, power, fuel capacity, and Sub Verniers (boost and turbo gained by either sapping an opponent's energy or time on the track), the sleds shoot the tubes at speeds upwards of 1,300 mph, using side thrusters to either drift or slide, in three-lap races through two series of Grand Prix competitions. The first 3-, 5-, 7- and then 10-course GP moving through Normal Mode (by placing fourth or better) sets the stage for Maximum Mode, where gravity and advanced tactics become key factors.

Vertigo sufferers beware, this ultra-beautiful game is full of subtleties that require meticulous navigation and skill. The first three races are a piece of cake but thereafter you need to pick a sled, train with it (the game's training mode is the shiznit) and prepare for some real competition. Making this a desirable endeavor, NEC has fashioned a game that is drop-dead gorgeous and set it to a real video game sound track, not some recycled pop-trash or grinding punk rot. The sleds themselves are so richly designed and wonderfully portrayed they almost defy comparison, and the courses, well, let's just say you'll be looking for smoke to come pouring out of your GameCube. With this game and F-Zero both coming pre-Q2, GameCube racing this year is off to a smashing start.

"Tube Slider jumps directly to the head of the GameCube racing class, placing itself firmly in the pole position waiting for F-Zero to take it on."

It's amazing what the GameCube can achieve when games are tailor made to exploit its specs

A very different, very good BoF

breath of fire
dragon quarter

words brady fiechter

Back when role-playing games struggled to exist outside the grip of Final Fantasy, a pack of lucky gamers discovered that there were indeed other amazing original series to explore. One of the best on the SNES was Breath of Fire, Capcom's commendable first attempt to create in a genre that a slim few companies found value in. I loved Breath of Fire, liked its direct sequel, strained to find much good about the third installment yet saw hope for the series when BOFIV popped up near the end of the PSone's incredible run. A modern update to a very capable series didn't seem so likely, yet here it is, and it's nothing like I thought it would be and probably the most entertaining since the original.

Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter does not have a number "five" branding it, which makes good sense when you start to see how little the game has to do with the series. In fact, this is not a traditional turn-based adventure, where you explore a massive world and manage all sorts of characters and visit distant lands where townspeople send you on your way with more items and more directions where to go next. Dragon Quarter takes place basically underground, where the inhabitants have fled to live free from the inhospitable conditions existing above. The one thread to the Breath of Fire series comes from the dragon-man Ryu, who can turn into a beastly dragon despite the ineffectual outcome of the shift; returning fans of the series might be let down a bit to know that dragon forms have no place in the game. Teaming with Ryu to compete with a despotic rival organization are two other very capable and equally interesting characters within the very basic story.

Dragon Quarter is ultimately powered by its engaging, strategy-influenced battle system, which hinges on an ability-point system that dictates how you can move and attack within a surrounding grid. Every slice with a weapon and step you take depletes the AP gauge, which grows and diminishes according to a number of factors that always must be monitored. At first, it seems relatively by-the-numbers and simplistic, but this engaging system gradually shows it complexities and unique, deeply strategic elements.

Enemies sneak around within your line of sight, and the key is to strike first, always rewarding you a one-up and important tactical advantages. Traps can be set to, say, lure the enemy into the corner with meat or damage a large pack with dynamite. Once in battle, your freedom to move is dependent on the AP score, and every strike of the three-tiered weapon system draws 10, 20, or 30 points according to the intensity of the attack.

Some of you will appreciate Dragon Quarter's intention to provide massive replay value, but here is where the game steps backwards for me: at around 12 hours, the quest is set up to grant you access to previously built skill sets, but to what end? I have no interest in going back into the game, no matter how enjoyable the first run was; give me more up front, not

an excuse to go back to what I've already experienced.

But that first experience shouldn't be missed. The game is packed with rich style and gorgeous designs, and the music is an exceptional presence. Not until I finished the game was I aware that the score was composed by Hitoshi Sakamoto, of FF Tactics and Vagrant Story fame, and Yasunori Mitsuda, who wrote the lovely Xenogears and Chrono Trigger music; the result shows.

If you're turned off by the short play time and were hoping for a more traditional RPG adventure, don't disregard Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter. I wanted something different too, but what I got instead is marvelous.

"I wanted something different too, but what I got instead is marvelous."

breath of fire: dragon quarter

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom** / available: **now**

play rating

Silent...deadly...

tenchu
wrath of heaven

words dave halverson

New über-developer K2 (named after ex-SNK honchos Kodama-san and Kuwasashi-san) are staffed with key talent from SNK, Square and Capcom, so it's no big surprise they've achieved, as expected, an extraordinary first game crafting the long overdue sequel to Tenchu and Tenchu 2—Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven. "A tale of two shadows born unto darkness and destined to die in darkness"...you can read the story when you play the game; I'm here to tell you why you should.

A mainstay in gaming since the invention of the sprite, ninjas are loved by all. From Ninja Gaiden to Shinobi to Ninja Spirit to Ninja Warriors and a zillion in between, the way they move, dress, and especially kill make them the perfect fodder for our entertainment pleasure. True ninja stealth, however, has eluded gaming, for the most part, due to limited AI, so it is here K2 focus their attention. How many ways to skin a cat—with how many tools—especially when your foe is smart, alert, and motivated? That is the question and you're going to love the answer.

There are few things as satisfying as the elegant finality of a stealth kill

Stealth killing is an elusive endeavor: too structured or predictable and it loses its appeal; too haphazard or sensitive and it grows laborious. K2 strikes the perfect balance. Each level in Wrath of Heaven is sewn together like an intricate ballet of death and deception. Sure, you can run in and draw your blade, but you will most likely die or waste valuable healing items meant to be consumed in private. Rather, knowing what tactic to use, and when, forms the game's allure, and there are many methods at your disposal. Your arsenal grows as you progress, as do your maneuvers, provided you play well. Committing nine stealth kills in a mission fills your Kuji Meter, earning you key abilities (needed to deal with the game's more complex stages) like ninja vision, ceiling strikes, and wall jumps. You're allowed six types of ninja items for each scenario and they all play a key roll in the game's flow. To name a few, poison rice can lure and temporarily paralyze and enemy, exploding shuriken stick to their mark until you detonate them, and colored rice can be dropped to mark your path. But beware: traps and thrown items stay in the game, and can be picked up and used against you. Everything in the environments, from shadows to different terrain, noise and items, affects each situation. The AI is deep as a well, and the different ways to play a level nearly endless.

The game's core mechanisms, a mixture of platforming, grappling, sliding along walls, creeping in the shadows, and hand-to-hand combat, are tuned to near-perfection. The camera can at times be somewhat laborious to "swing" to frame the kill, but this is compensated for by pressing L1, which affords instant free-look for positioning, no matter what angle you are facing. Satisfaction comes in many ways, but especially from the stealth kills, followed closely by character design, story integration, music, and environmental details—all top of the scale. One-hit kills trigger a blood-soaked death scene (depending on your position) from violent decapitation to torturous, slow arterial drainage, the victim clasping his or her throat, gasping out their final decree. Visually, details such as tall grass, layered hair, and clothing (Ayame is especially wonderful to behold) are meticulously crafted. Rain, for instance, causes the ground to puddle, producing subtle rippling in synch with Rikimaru and Ayame's delicate ninja scamper, and the drops pelt everything in unison, not just the ground. Overall, this is a beautiful game, muted and dark, with a solid story line and mature themes, made all the more dramatic by a truly wonderful soundtrack—a melding of modern compositions and traditional Gagaku style, using distinct Japanese wind, string, and percussion instruments.

Most of you will likely begin with Rikimaru and graduate to Ayame, although I suggest the opposite; Ayame is a fascinating character, possessing the sort of moves that make ninja lore so quixotic. Tenchu is a marvelous game that builds and rewards you the more you play it. Take your time to master its systems and then sit back and let your inner silent assassin come out to play.

"...from violent decapitation to torturous slow arterial drainage, the victim clasping his or her throat... "

tenchu: wrath of heaven

system: **ps2** / developer: **k2** / publisher: **activision** / available: **now**

play rating

apex

Zoom ze...

...ve halverson

Along with the thrill of the race,
you get the satisfaction of building
a company and launching your own
line of roadsters, sports cars, dream
cars, and supercars

If you haven't discovered Apex Racing yet, this is the most important Xbox review in this issue. This somewhat under-marketed title would have been my racing game of the year had it hit in '02, but still, as it stands, it's going to be a tough act to follow.

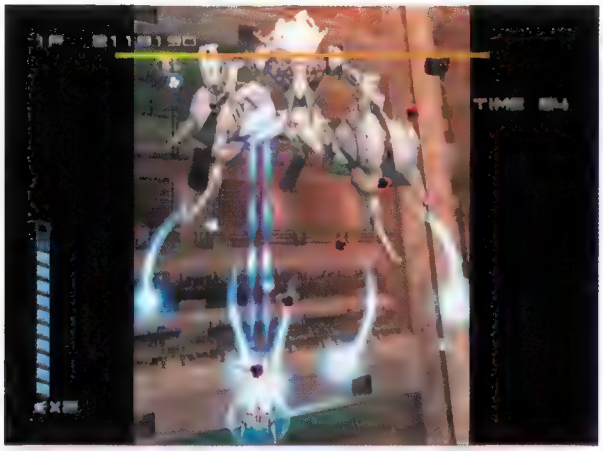
If all Apex had under its hood was the racing, it would more than justify a purchase, with over 50 courses ranging from tight mountain roads to meticulously laid city streets, both long laps and short, and a selection of exotic (and concept) cars that is simply unrivaled. Physics, AI, real-time deformation, weather, interactive replays, lens flares, filtered light, full-motion signage—you name it, there's nothing this game doesn't have. The engine is superlative; detail is off the charts and the distance mapping…truly a work of Xbox magic. Massive mountains far off on the horizon—normally matte paintings—are even polygonal, and up-close trees, buildings, and details like plumes of balloons are done to perfection. However, Apex doesn't stop there—not even close. Along with the thrill of the race, you get the satisfaction of building a company: hiring, building out your space, and launching your own line of roadsters, sports cars, dream cars, and super cars to compete in races throughout America, Europe and Asia. Moreover, I'm not talking afterthought here. It's all rendered-out, well scripted, and visual. You begin with a beat-up gas station and watch as it slowly becomes a full-fledged factory—like Tucker, only cooler, faster, and without the government breathing down your neck. How well you perform and rep your cars are indicative of your company's success—how cool is that? Want to hire that hot secretary? Then you had better win. The cars themselves also deserve major praise, not just for the real-time reflective properties, but also for the meticulous detail and beautiful designs. Depending on your prototype, the concept cars, especially the roadsters, look like something the big boys might actually produce. You'll find the range of soundtracks to your liking as well, rounding out this rather amazing racer. It may not provide the juice that, say, a Ridge Racer can, but otherwise, in the realm of the racing/lifestyle sims we're seeing, Apex moves to the head of the class.

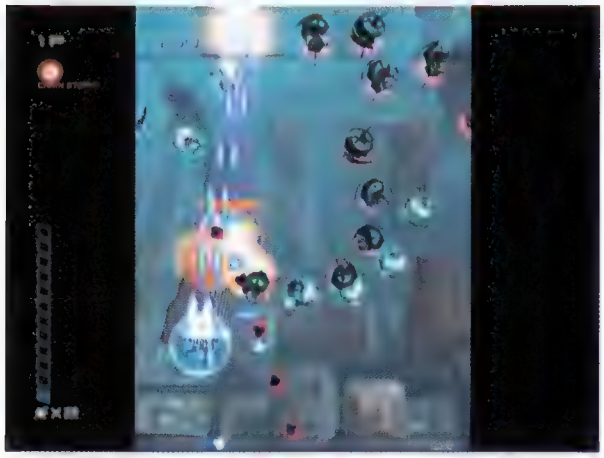
You manufacture it, you race it. Below, a prototype roadstar gets ready to roll out of the factory

apex

system: **xbox** / developer: **milestone** / publisher: **atari** / available: **now**

play rating

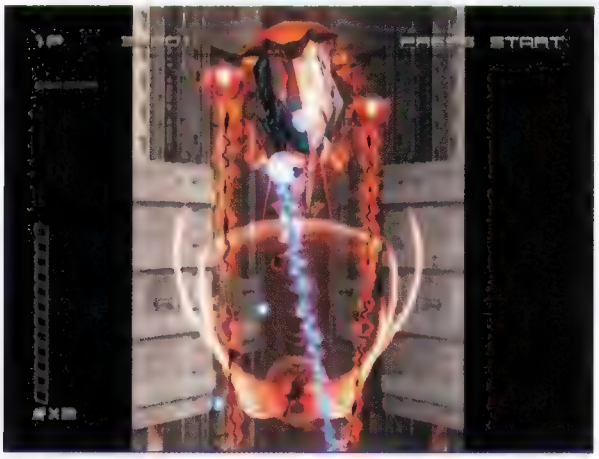




Pure shooter brilliance

ikaruga

michael hobbs



"Treasure has crafted another masterpiece of hyper-tuned overhead shooter action, the likes of which the world may never see again."

Ikaruga (Ikaru is Japanese for masked hawfinch, a bird) is not a direct sequel to Radiant Silvergun, and offers up a very different, more arcade-like hard thrill.

The overhead shooter. Here is a genre that can trace its roots back to the very first video games ever made. Once the bastion of darkened arcades and, later, 16-bit consoles, this long forgotten genre still has a place among game maniacs all around the world. Some of these maniacs apparently still work at Treasure, as they have crafted another masterpiece of hyper-tuned overhead shooter action, the likes of which the world may never see again.

Being a conversion of an arcade game, this is a frightfully short experience in theory. In practice, however, its length is extended in that most classic of conventions: it's bloody hard. But the genius and beauty of Ikaruga, as is with all great Treasure games, is that its difficulty is the result of painstaking design. This isn't like some Psikyo shooter, where survival is a physical impossibility (all the better to eat those quarters). No enemy attack sequence, no matter how difficult it might first seem, is impossible to survive in Ikaruga.

But this is a slightly esoteric thrill. The real joy in the game stems from its immaculately executed gameplay. Using a favorite Treasure technique of alternating firepower, Ikaruga uses parts of the brain that rarely get a workout in today's almost flaccid gaming scene. It works like this: the red form of your ship inflicts double damage to blue enemies, while allowing you to suck up whatever red bullets come from the red enemies as you destroy them. In the red form, blue bullets are lethal. The reverse is true when your ship is in blue form. Got it? Good.

From this devilishly simple idea comes a brain-flailing dose of shooter brilliance. Every awesome dodging, switching scenario you can imagine is here, as the designers explore every facet of this amazing play mechanic. And once you gain some proficiency with the game, it becomes like playing a musical instrument or dancing. It transcends normal thought processes and becomes something that's almost not-cerebral, for to think about what you are doing is to find yourself dead. You just do it, and almost sit back and marvel at what your hands and mind are accomplishing.

And there's no question that Ikaruga looks amazing, even if most will be playing it vertically letterboxed. The detail and design are both fantastic, and the game slows down in the most awe-inspiring ways when you and the enemy both unload on each other.

So shooter maniacs like myself can rejoice, as the genre is not entirely dead yet. In fact, it's just seen one of its finest hours.

ikaruga

system: **gamecube** / developer: **treasure** / publisher: **infogrames** / available: **now**

play rating

A new fighting-game franchise?

tao feng

words brady fiechter

"The game is not forgiving to the weak player who wants to jump in and execute a flurry of moves instantly..."

The last time...no, the only time an American design studio was able to come up with a workable fighting-game model was with the sporadically appealing MK series. Exceptional new fighting games are rare and infrequent, in or out of Japan; bold new ideas don't really exist.

In original Mortal Kombat co-creator Jon Tobias, this reality became the motivational spark to ignite the idea behind what has turned out to be the best American fighting game since, well, since Moral Kombat. Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus is well crafted and technically solid, borrowing skillfully from several of the best 3D brawlers while adding in its own distinct brand of combat.

The game is not forgiving to the weak player who wants to jump in and execute a flurry of moves instantly, rewarding the patient fighter who is willing to extensively tune-in to the fighting mechanics. Tao Feng lacks the precision command and invigorating exchanges that arise from a heated bout in the aging yet superior brawlers like Tekken and Virtua Fighter, but it uses new techniques and deliberate, expansive play to its advantage. One of the more impressive aspects of Tao Feng is the strategy of interacting with the environment—swing from polls and pillars, catapult from walls and obstacles, inflict damage from crashes into objects like arcade units and power generators. You have to be aware of your environment, side stepping a lot to position and counter, and often an aggressive button pounding will only expose you to a brutal offensive. For an even broader dimension to the bouts, isolated damage can incapacitate or diminish the strength of an opponent's limb: it looks cool to see the fighters getting all messed up, but the actual impact on the flow and strategy of the match ultimately deserves the praise.

Tao Feng's package reflects the dull visual luster of rudimentary comic-book design, muddling its technical strengths with no overriding creativity. It plays well enough and is good fun to pick up, but finding a bristling personality and energy to the cabal of fighters and their trite arenas—the game still feels too limited despite its ambitious otherwise—is a stretch. Like the early MK and even its latest extension, Tao Feng is a slice of American cheese that satisfies when you're in the mood.

Watching your character show damage is something every fighting game should have

tao feng **play** rating

system: **xbox** / developer: **studio gigante** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **now**

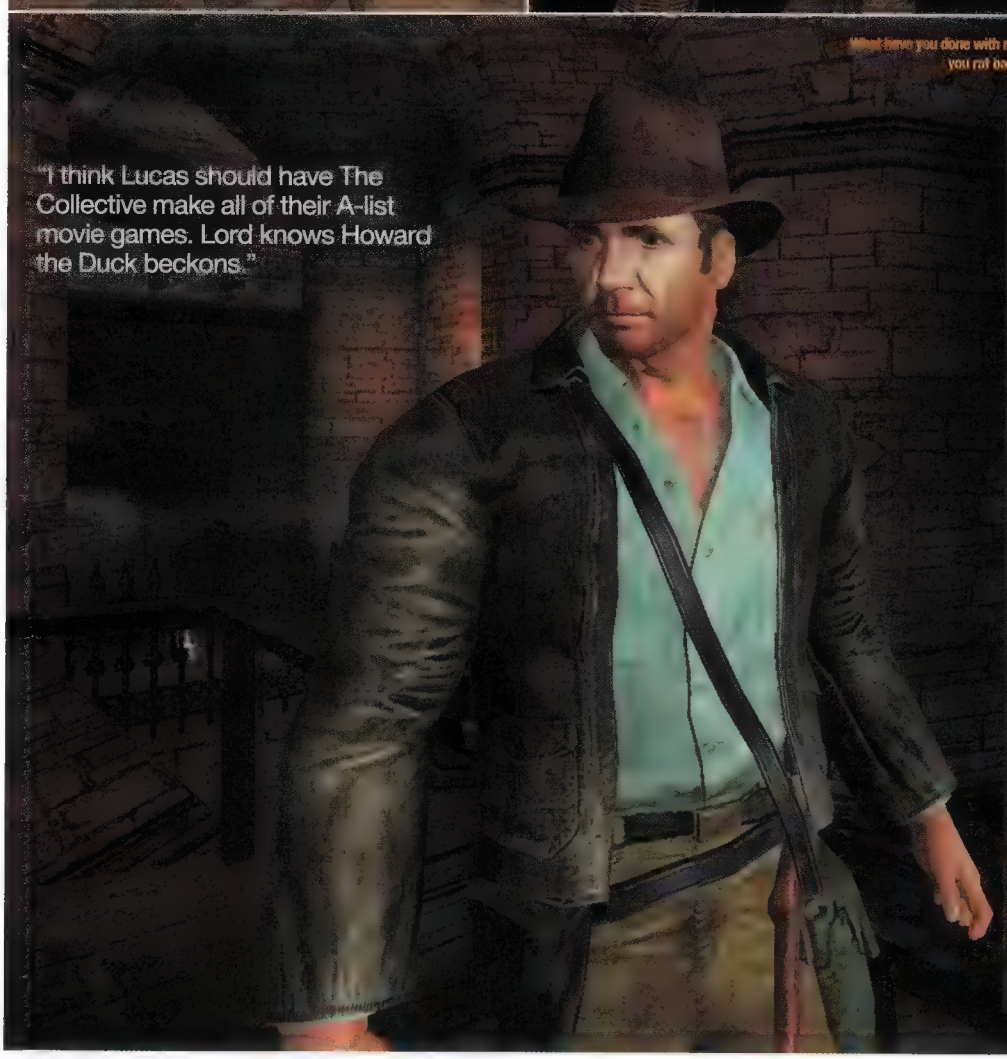
Fortune and glory never looked so good

indiana jones

and the emperor's tomb

words dave halverson

What have you done with my dog, you rat bastard?!



"I think Lucas should have The Collective make all of their A-list movie games. Lord knows Howard the Duck beckons."

The theme is etched indelibly in the mind of every movie buff, and tag lines like "Fortune and Glory" dual for cranial free space with the likes of your first booby squeeze (unless you're female in which, er, I'll leave that to you) and High School graduation, including how much you puked, and the person you woke up beside. To know and love *Indiana Jones* is a film connoisseur's birthright, but to find a game that lives up to his namesake, well, that has been quite a different story.

Who better to tackle this behemoth of a factoid than The Collective, whose Buffy the Vampire Slayer for Xbox chimed in as one of 2002's very best games? The Lucas Arts curse of their biggest franchise players rarely living up to their marquees is finally beginning to weaken. Indiana Jones and The Emperor's Tomb is a new beginning—fitting with the film franchise gearing up for its last stand.

Inevitably, parallels will be drawn between Lara Croft and Indiana Jones, as well they should; this is a good thing. After all, they both raid tombs, defy the odds, and get a charge out of danger management. Why should one change for the benefit of being different? In my book, there's plenty of room for this sort of gameplay as long as it's intelligently formed, as it is here. Although it takes a good three hours or so to really reap the best the game has to offer (as it should), it thoroughly reeks of Indy from the outset: the actor is a dead ringer for Harrison Ford and the story is crafted with all the finesse of a first-class Hollywood production. It of course rides on the sturdy Buffy engine, so Slayer fans will experience some deja vu, like familiar animation routines, the same bread of (excellent) hand-to-hand combat, and a similar integrity in the environments, which start out good and build to grandeur. The vistas in this game—skillfully laid polygonal architecture layered over gorgeous matte paintings—are spectacular, especially in Prague and Istanbul. But where Indy moves beyond the realm of Buffy is in the area of platforming and puzzle solving; not lame puzzle solving, but well-devised mechanisms and truly compelling riddles worthy of the world's foremost archeologist. Indy creeps along walls, shimmies, gets all Belmont with his whip, and uses an array of guns and ammo, all in conjunction with each fascinating scenario, from ancient castle peaks to mystical underwater sanctums and cavernous ruins. And when he's not blasting Nazis or battling massive beasts, he's exploring or discovering. There's a fair amount of solid adventuring in The Emperor's Tomb; not the garden-variety type that exists solely for the sake of the franchise or level elongation, but actual interesting scenarios not unlike Lara's first and most grand adventure.

Beyond a color palette that paints a perfect picture and a character model that can hold its own next to the real thing (although a tad more animation would have been nice and a little less residual Buffy movement), the score, which manages to play a major role in the game, is worthy of an award. Like the original Tomb Raider, only better, it sets the mood for the game so well that it heightens the gameplay, drawing you into the world much like Spielberg and Lucas did so many years ago. Fortune and glory never looked, or sounded, so good. I think LucasArts should have The Collective make all of their A-list movie games. Lord knows Howard the Duck beckons.

indiana jones and the emperor's tomb

system: **xbox** / developer: **the collective** / publisher: **lucasarts** / available: **now**

play rating ●●●●◐

DMX, Method Man, Ludacris...

def jam vendetta

words tom ham

When Electronic Arts and EA Sports created their EA Sports BIG brand, they knew exactly what they were doing, developing games with over-the-top sports action with lots of attitude. It was a formula that has undoubtedly generated incredible amounts of success. Do SSX and NBA Street ring a bell? And with each new game, EA Sports BIG manages to raise the bar that much more by bringing us new characters and experiences unlike anything we've seen before.

Their latest game, Def Jam Vendetta, continues this trend. Utilizing a recent partnership deal with hip-hop giant Def Jam, Vendetta is EA's answer to wrestling games. Forget about The Rock, Stone Cold and Hulk Hogan. Those characters are so passé. It's time to make way for DMX, Method Man and Ludacris. Think about it: what would you rather fight in? Spandex and Lycra or baggy jeans and wife-beater shirts? Mmhmm, thought so. But you can't help but wonder, "Why would EA make a wrestling game with hip-hop artists beating the crap out of each other?" Simple answer: because they can.

The bulk of the gameplay in Vendetta revolves around story mode. In typical BIG fashion, players pick a fighter (out of four) and then enter the world of underground fight clubs where the ultimate goal is to reach the big boss, D-Mob. Along the way, you'll have run-ins with his posse and various other bosses in the game, namely Def Jam recording artists. As you defeat characters and progress forward, those characters are made available to you in other gameplay modes, including multiplayer. There are over 45 characters in the game including all the biggies: DMX, Ludacris, Method Man, Redman, NORE, Scarface, Ghostface Killah, Capone, Keith Murray and WC. Def Jam recording artist Christina Milian is also in the game as is world-famous DJ Funkmaster Flex.

Sadly, story mode is pretty linear and it's the same outcome for all four characters. There are some forks in the road, but they all lead to the same place. It's unfortunate that the game is identical for all characters. It would've been nice to have a different storyline for each. Tag-team matches come up here and there, and there are even some amusing catfights between girlfriends. But after it's all said and done, you'll soon realize the best part of the game is multiplayer.

Wrestling fans familiar with developer Aki Corporation will feel right at home with the grappling system in Vendetta. It utilizes the same system of weak and strong grapples, very reminiscent of wrestling games appearing on the N64. The incredible range of moves in Vendetta makes it the deepest and most versatile wrestling game on the market. With over 1,500 moves and dozens of signature special finishing moves, you'll be discovering new ways to pummel your opponent long after you start playing the game.

And without beating around the bush, Def Jam Vendetta is extremely violent (and I mean that in the most positive way). Be prepared for excessive kicks to the groin, rope burns to the face, bashing heads into the ground and cheap shots galore. Each character has his own set of combination moves that can be executed fairly easily with practice. There is a real helpful tutorial that goes through the basics of moves, grapples and attacks. Beginning players should definitely check it out if they don't want to get their asses handed to them.

When you chain various combinations together, you'll fill up your Momentum meter. Another BIG staple (like the Gamebreaker meter in NBA Street), the Momentum meter fills up as your character performs various moves during a match. The more complicated combos you do, the faster the meter gets filled up. Successfully taunting your opponent will also fill up the meter. After the meter is filled, you can then activate your character's signature finishing move. Dependant on how much health your opponent has, a well-timed signature move will KO a fighter real quick.

Visually, Def Jam Vendetta is excellent. Every fighter is incredibly big and extremely detailed. The animations are silky smooth and the combos just seem to meld into one another

Check the fingers!
Vendettas models aim to please.
But isn't that Eminem's sweat suit?

seamlessly. There is hardly any slowdown, even with four fighters in the ring. There are 10 underground venues and each has its own style and vibe. For example, Club Luda (Ludacris' crib) has dancing girls on poles. The Def Jam Vendetta arena has flashing jumbotrons and club lights. Without a doubt, the developers have successfully created an authentic hip-hop world complete with over-the-top visuals and presentation.

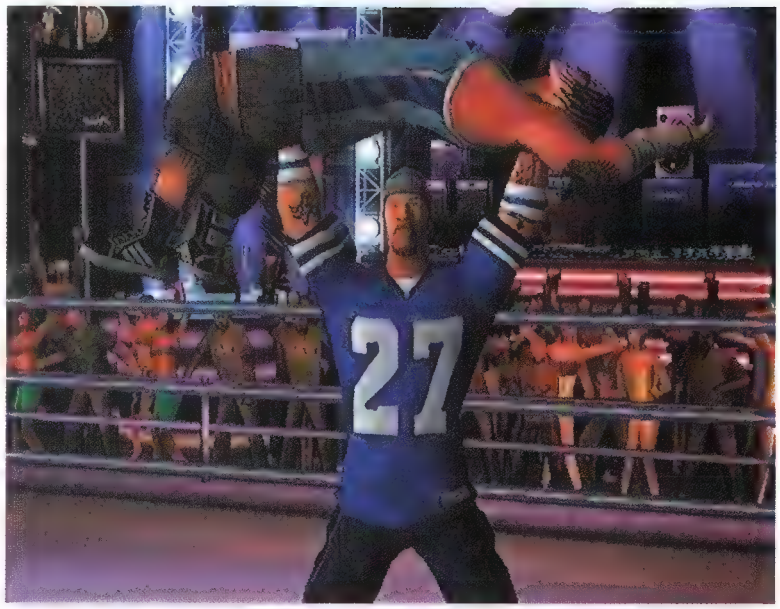
The sound is another key component of Def Jam Vendetta. Each Def Jam artist lent their voice for their respective characters. So when you're facing Redman, that's his actual voice that is taunting you. With respect to music, there are 14 licensed tracks in the game including: "Fight the Power" (Public Enemy), "Nuthin'" (NORE), "Party Up" (DMX), "In Cold Blood" (Scarface) and "Bring the Pain" (Method Man). DMX's new track, "X Gonna Give It To You" is also in the game as well. What we don't understand is that, during gameplay, we are expecting to hear the complete song (lyrics and all), but what we end up with is monotonous instrumental loops repeating over and over again. NBA Street Vol. 2 has the option to hear the actual song during gameplay; why Vendetta doesn't have it I don't know.

Unfortunately, there are some glaring flaws in Vendetta that prevent it from reaching greatness. For starters, the in-game camera. For the most part, the camera works (in both single player and multiplayer) but when the game shifts to tag-team mode (this happens four times in the game), the camera makes it impossible to play. Now if the action is in the center of the ring, it's fine. But God forbid if the fight moves outside the ring or opposite sides. There were times when I was blindly hitting buttons in hopes of attacking an opponent that I couldn't even see. Before I knew it, I could see the opponent's Blazin bar light up and within seconds the round was over. Not only is this extremely frustrating, it totally brings the flow of the game to a screeching halt.

The biggest issue with Vendetta involves story mode and the unlocking of characters. As you progress in the game and defeat opponents and boss characters, you are given a message indicating that these characters are now unlocked and available in "all modes of gameplay." What's incredibly lame is that these characters are only available to you and only you in all other gameplay modes—meaning, if you go through the game and unlock all the characters and a buddy of yours wants to play multiplayer with you (who has never played before), when his character selection screen comes up, only the default players are available. If your friend wants to use DMX or Method Man or D-Mob, they have to play through the whole game themselves.

Flaws aside, Def Jam Vendetta is a solid game that not only wrestling fans can get into, but fighting fans as well. The presentation, graphics and sound are top notch, and I have to hand it to EA Sports BIG for successfully pulling off a game that could've been really cheesy.

"Def Jam Vendetta is extremely violent (and I mean that in the most positive way)."



Taunting is unfortunately limited to the pre-fight antics

def jam vendetta

system: **playstation 2, gamecube** / developer: **aki corp, ea canada** / publisher: **ea sports** / available: **now**

play rating

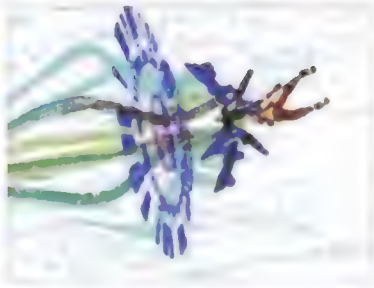
Red Faction 2

system:
developer:
publisher:
available:

While not as entertaining on the story level and skimping with less creative focus, Red Faction 2 takes much of what made the suprise hit Red Faction so good and gives it the typical sequel-polish. What is here is handled extremely well, from the just-right control and intensely staged action to the cool weapons and nicely drawn world. Receiving the game at an improved 60 fps is the big Xbox blessing, but beyond the obvious, the game doesn't go anywhere new outside the PlayStation 2 version. Staying true to the genre, Red Faction 2 is stellar familiarity, separating itself mostly from the pack with the GeoMod technology — fancy talk for being able to blow up solid objects like walls and pillars. Yet another strong first-person shooter.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating

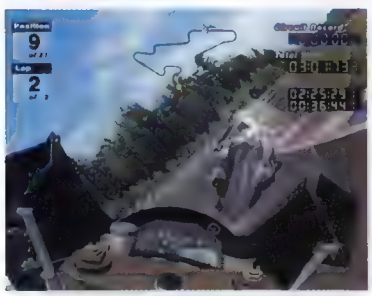


.hack part 1: Infection

system:
available: now

.hack: infection is but the starting point for an ambitious cross-media assault that will eventually span four games, four original video animations (one to be included with each game) and a TV series. But what matters most of all is how good of a game this one is. First of all, it's damn original, being a one-player game designed to look and feel like an online game such as PSO or FFXI. Enter a town and you'll find other "online players" milling about, shopping, talking insane nonsense. Exit the fake online game and you'll get to read and reply to E-mail, surf the web for game-related stories and even get tons of facts from a BBS. The game itself is a very competent dungeon-exploration affair that neither looks great nor is that polished, but it's very addictive. Battles are constantly broken up by the incessant need to enter the menu to attack, but again, it's all somehow very addictive, as the story, setting and character designs combine to realize the effect of having a great time. MH

play rating



MotoGP 3

system:
developer:
publisher:
available:

Is it just me, or has Namco been treading water lately? No doubt, the sleeping giant will awaken soon with the likes of Soul Calibur, Star Fox, and a new Ridge Racer on the way, but for now, my generally great enthusiasm for Namco is sitting a bit idle. Moto GP3 doesn't help matters too much. Of course, I really like this series, but honestly, this sequel seems perhaps a bit unnecessary. It has the same mix of easy arcade handling and insane simulation modes, along with great-looking replays and courses, but it feels far too much like Moto GP2 to be considered worthy. And about the only visual change is the addition of a rather great-looking first-person view that shows off the handlebars and a fantastic water distortion in the rain. Good luck playing in this view, however. If you've never played Moto GP, then this is a great place to start, but those who are expecting something much more than what was in Moto GP2 should pass.

MICHAEL HOBBS

play rating

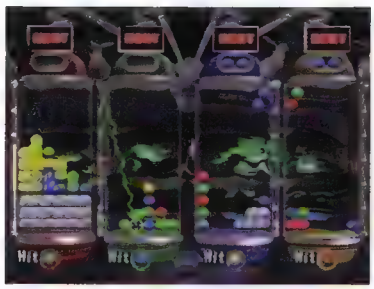
Jurassic Park: Project Genesis

system: xbox
developer: blue tongue
publisher:
available:

The Sims revealed that gamers enjoy the idea of becoming God, ruling their little fantasy nest with deviously addictive pleasure. Jurassic Park sort of takes this idea into the extinct animal realm, where you get to create your own park and populate it with dinosaurs. Even if the game looked better than it unfortunately does, there isn't much here to reward you to spend far too many hours building your little community of beasts. The game part of the game has you snapping pictures and keeping stray dinos under control, which couldn't be a more miscalculated idea in modern game design. A select few will enjoy the tinkering.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating



My Street

system: ps2

If you've never experienced the terror of moving to a new community as a child, now you can pretend you really did. In My Street, mom informs you that you really must make friends and get to know the new community you've recently settled down in. With only a few bucks in the piggy bank and no toys, it's off to make friends, learn the area, play games and win fun prizes. Dodgeball, racing, marbles and puzzle solving are a few of the events your new friends involve you in, and you can take your newfound gaming to the net for even more options. It looks suprisingly nice and is [illegible] enough, but do you really want to visit My Street? Unlike Animal Crossing, the tenet here is: No Grown-ups Allowed.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating

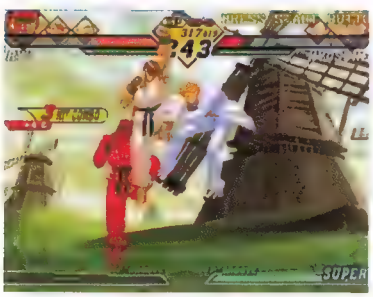
King of Route 66

publisher:
available: no

18 Wheeler was a fun if achingly short and limited game, one that was rather difficult to recommend as a full-price purchase. The sequel, King of Route 66, is a whole different story, however, expanding greatly on the premise of the first and offering far more gameplay. The core concept is unchanged, as a good chunk of the game is centered around driving a big rig with as much maniacal speed as possible to deliver your load before your rival. But now, there's a slightly deeper story involving an evil corporation and its gang of unruly truckers, and the delivery action is broken up by trailer-free speed levels. Of course, there are all sorts of weird challenges along the way, and everything is presented in a hilariously over-the-top Japanese interpretation of the American truck-driver scene.

MICHAEL HOBBS

play rating



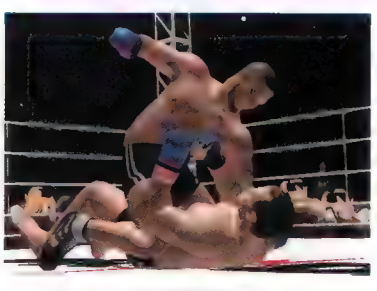
Capcom vs SNK 2: EO

system: xbox
developer: capcom
publisher: capcom
available: now

Look, these 2D fighting games are not for the new guy on the block who knows little more than GTA and Tony Hawk. If you're someone who has been around as long as I have, you've played way too many versions of what is becoming dated and deflated on the newest consoles. And yet, we still love them, because they still work. Here we get lovely backgrounds, high energy, not-so-good animation, good-enough Xbox control. Biggest draw: play your buddies over the net. The game flows smoothly enough to be played properly online, but really, the appeal is nothing like the games designed specifically for Xbox Live.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating



Pride FC

system: ps2
developer: anchor
publisher: [illegible]
available: now

If you're looking at Pride FC as an esoteric fighting game with little to offer your more [illegible] Pride is big fun. Executing the huge move set is responsive and feels as solid as any [illegible] of the matches end quickly—such is the style of fighting—with submissions coming [illegible] and techniques, but the real separation comes when you create your own dude, [illegible] shaded and textured, but they do look good. A few more arenas and better detail would have been nice. The only real problem I have with the game is the inability to build your fighter's attributes through climbing the ranks. BRADY FIECHTER

play rating

Teeny little spray cans, big-time gameplay

jet grind radio advance

words dave halverson

True, I love the Game Boy Advance SP in an unnatural way. We don't climb trees together (a sad pun; I'm pro Michael), but it is having a serious impact on my schedule, even more so than I feared—my love for traditional sprite-based play and 2D now back in full force for me to squeeze in between playing stacks of console games. Games I eventually jettisoned in the interest of maintaining my vision are suddenly plausible, and now this…Jet Grind Radio…on a handheld. I laughed at first too; after all, how does one bring this hip-hop jet-skating shred-fest in to the top-down realm and stay anywhere close to its roots? But hey, it's a done deal. Wisely, the task was assigned to Vicarious Visions to juxtapose with the Tony Hawk mold and then begin building from there, adding the funk. And so they have. The second you turn it on you're like, "Wha? Is that…the actual music?" Yes indeedy, many samples adorn the game. And while they are limited and do loop the loop, the funky fresh Jet Grind feeling is fully intact; and it's Tokyo-To time again.

Professor K is all up in here, and all the same rules apply in accordance with the original Jet Grind Radio ordinance: tag at your own risk. In Jet Set Radio Future, you were free to roam, but in JGR time is limited and the man is everywhere, along with their artillery. Aside from challenges, the base gameplay is to tag all of the necessary points (or people) in the allotted time, and shake off the fuzz. Surprisingly, it's nearly as fun here as it was on Dreamcast. The iso-view takes a little getting used to, as does the point-and-go control, but once you're in the groove it's all good, from the animation to the super cool cutscenes and familiar level design.

JGR has landed on a Game Boy. This bodes well for yet another sequel. Perhaps Sega and Smilebit will wisely choose the GameCube as the franchise's next benefactor.

"The iso-view takes a little getting used to, as does the point and go control, but once you're in the groove it's all good."

Everything you love about Jet Grind Radio is in here, from the funky tunes to

jet grind radio advance

system: **game boy advance** / developer: **vicarious visions** / publisher: **thq** / available: **now**

play rating

More GBA solid gold...

golden sun
the lost age

words chris hoffman

I can't remember the last time I had so much fun getting stuck in an RPG. Not that Golden Sun: The Lost Age is an overly difficult game; it's just that unlike most RPGs of the last decade, this one doesn't take you by the hand and lead you from plot point to plot point. Instead, GS: TLA is filled with an exhilarating sense of freedom. The vast overworld is built for exploration and discovery (forget about those connect-the-dots maps of most modern RPGs), and it's a simple joy to find that temple hidden in the desert or a small settlement on a secluded island. Though this non-linearity means you might miss something you need to proceed, finding that something is oh-so-satisfying—and the restrained enemy encounter rate wards off frustration, too.

Another great triumph of The Lost Age is the design of the puzzles. As in the first Golden Sun, a good portion of the gameplay revolves around finding and using new psychic abilities for your characters, from manipulating ropes to causing explosions, and the clever dungeons put these skills—and your brain—to use with puzzles that (dare I say it?) rival the best from the Zelda series. The fast-paced, summon-heavy battle system is also pretty much borrowed from the original, as are the graphics, but that's hardly a problem. t.

If I could improve one aspect of The Lost Age, it would be the story. The plot takes a backseat for the bulk of the game (more than a third is spent trying to find a boat), and when it does make itself heard it has little to say until the end. Fans of the original will surely get more out of this sequel, since that's where all the plot set-up occurred, and especially since you get to play as the first game's antagonist and learn about his motives. Don't worry, Isaac and company also return; you can even transfer data from the original game.

Even if you've never touched the original, however, Golden Sun: The Lost Age is a lot of fun and comes easy to recommend. It's enjoyable to be Lost.

Golden's Sun rich RPG style is perfectly suited for the GBA...

~~Seriously looks gigantic and fun, and I find it hard to imagine a better looking RPG for the GBA~~

golden sun: the lost age

system: **game boy advance** / developer: **camelot software planning** / publisher: **nintendo** / available: **april**

play rating

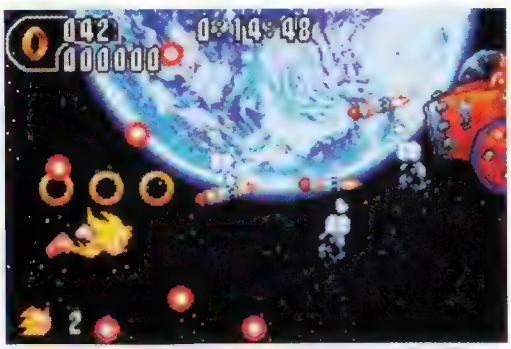
sonic advance 2

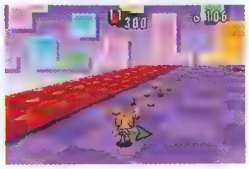
Playing Sonic Advance for the first time, I didn't flip out nearly as much as I should have considering it was the first real 32-bit 2D Sonic. Given that the game was devoid of many of the nuances I felt earned the 2D franchise the honor of being mentioned in the same breath as Mario, I feared Sonic's best years were behind him. A few minutes with Sonic Advance 2, however, put the blue back in my groove; this one rivals Sonic 2 and Sonic CD for the series crown.

Infused with fresh new play mechanics, fully amped visuals, trademark tunes, and deeper levels, Sega's little blue speed freak is born anew and he's brought Knuckles, Tails, Amy and a new character along for the ride—the ultra-cute Cream the Rabbit. Oh, she's fruity all right, but she flies like Tails with her ears and has an attack Chao that evens the odds against Robotnik.

Sonic's 2D heritage is rooted in high-speed gameplay contrasted by low-speed platforming and exploration, facing off with Robotnik, and a very special sensory feel, conducive with Sonic's mainstay environments: Earth, Fire, Ice, Industrial, Techno, Sky and the odd music or pinball world. In the realm of 2D, since Sonic games do play themselves to some extent (ProTip: Hold Right), Sonic's as much a state of mind as it is a game—a high-speed roller coaster ride, tailor made for gamers of all ages. Translation: it's a hit-or-miss proposition relying heavily on its extremities, and this one hits the mark. There's more to explore in terms of available paths and various contraptions like swings, hooks, grind rails, speed boosters, etc. (contingent on which character you select), and Robotnik is at his wily best—less the predictable pushover of late, and more the old-school crafty villain. And the graphics are just bliss: crazy parallax, glistening crystals, heat waves, blinking neon, sparks, crazy animation—everything you love about 32-bit 2D (well almost; it's no Astal) is on display. With any luck, one of these days we'll get one of two things: either a traditional 2D Sonic in 3D, or a next-generation 2D Sonic. In the meantime Sonic is alive and well over at, er, Nintendo.

"Sonic's as much a state of mind as it is a game—a high-speed roller coaster ride, tailor made for gamers of all ages."





sonic advance 2 play rating ●●●●●

system: **game boy advance** / developer: **vicarious visions** / publisher: **thq** / available: **now**

Konami delivers soccer gold

winning eleven 6
international

words tom ham

Goooooooo
oooooaaaaaaa
aaaaaaa!!!

Finally! Konami has developed a sports game worth playing. The most popular soccer franchise in Europe and Japan has finally made it way to the US. Winning Eleven 6 International is the definitive soccer game for the PlayStation 2. Sorry FIFA, we're going to have to put you aside, there's a new soccer game in town and we're in love.

Aside from the typical gameplay modes such as Exhibition, League, Club and Practice, the true star of Winning Eleven 6 is the Master League. This is the closest any soccer game has gotten to a full on Franchise mode. Players start in the third division and have to work their way up to the first division, ultimately vying for the top spot. Players have to negotiate salaries, trade players, buy players and even rent players—anything to reach the number one spot. Not only are the stats tracked flawlessly, players can check out their team's overall performance, who scores the most, how the passing is, who is defending properly, etc. And since players fatigue in the game (which will carry over to your next match), you'll have to know when is the best time to rest your players to get their optimal performance. Using top players over and over will just end up hurting your team in the long run. Although it may appear overwhelming at first, the Master League is an armchair coach's dream.

But what sets Winning Eleven 6 apart from EA Sports' FIFA and any other soccer game for that matter, is the gameplay. Winning Eleven 6 is just a pleasure to play. Take the passing system for example. In addition to short passes on the ground, players can now execute high passes down the field for some exciting plays. Shooting also requires some skill now. Players have to learn when is the appropriate time to tap the button and when to press it. Out-playing your opponent now requires a little more finesses then just fancy dribbling.

Visually, Winning Eleven 6 scores another goal. The stadiums are first rate and show tons of activity in the stands. From flashing cameras to waving flags, it's all first rate. The field textures are also quite good. The individual player's look like their real-life counterparts and the animations are strikingly real. Although there is a little slowdown from time to time, it doesn't take away from the gameplay in the least. Throw in great play-by-play commentary, 54 national teams and 40 club teams worldwide and excellent sound, and Winning Eleven 6 is without a doubt the best soccer game to date.

"Winning Eleven 6 is the definitive soccer game for the PlayStation 2"

winning eleven 6 international — **play** rating

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **kcej** / publisher: **konami** / available: **may**

Short but sweet

daytona 272

words tom nam

...Saw Days of Thunder a few too many times...The real Cole Trickle?

To properly kick off the race festivities at the Daytona 500, Sierra Entertainment and Intel held an event at the Stock Car Racing FanFest to show off their latest wares. Developer Papyrus Racing Games and Sierra Entertainment were showing off their latest racing title, NASCAR Racing 2003, and Intel was there to talk about their latest P4 processor. Of course **play** was there, hanging out, drinking beer and trying not to get beat up by some ornery rednecks.

Our review of NASCAR Racing 2003 is on the next page, so we're not going to talk about that here. We did however get the opportunity to chat with Tim Thraves, Platform Launch Manager at Intel. We picked his brain about PC gaming and this funny thing called "hyper thread technology."

It's no secret that Intel has been a strong supporter of the gaming industry. If you really think about it, why would we need a 3.06 GHz P4 processor anyway? To check email? Yeah, right. To surf the web? Whatever dude. Aside from your typical resource-heavy graphics program or video editing applications, the only reason we get faster processors is so we can play the latest games. If anyone says it's for anything else, they're lying. And Intel's latest powerhouse chip utilizes hyper threading technology, and we found out why this is so key for gamers.

"Hyper-threading technology has two key benefits," explains Thraves, "first and foremost, it makes the PC act like a dual-processor system, which means you'll get a 20% improvement in performance. And second benefit is multitasking. Hyper-threading technology gives your PC the enhanced ability to run two-processor-intensive tasks at the same time." What does this mean to you? How about burning a CD while playing your favorite game, without sacrificing performance? Yeah, we thought that would get your attention.

"In terms of gaming, hyper-threading technology helps in many ways," continues Thraves, "because the chip is generating faster gameplay, players will see higher framerates and polygon counts. Animation will become smoother and more realistic. And since your computer is reacting faster to your controls, your emphasis now is on skill. So now you can't blame your PC if you keep getting killed [laughs]."

So what game developers are currently utilizing hyper-threading technology? "Well I really can't say which developers are incorporating hyper-thread technology," concludes Thraves, "but I will say Intel is working with all the major players in this industry."

We'll have a review of Intel's latest and greatest gaming beast in next month's issue. Meanwhile, let's check out the best NASCAR game on the planet.

Gentlemen start your hard drives...

nascar racing 2003 season

The thrill of NASCAR (an oxymoron if we've ever heard one) comes to life in Sierra's NR 2003

Papyrus Racing Games have continued to push the envelope when it comes to their NASCAR line. With every version, the powerhouse developer manages to bring innovation and more realism to make them the true leader in NASCAR games.

NASCAR Racing 2003 Season continues this tradition and, without question, is the must-have racing game for any fan of the sport. The game will appeal to NASCAR junkies and race fans alike with its all new 3D graphics engine which allows for much improved vehicle physics and more realistic crashes – be prepared for rolling cars and spectacular wrecks. Raising the realisim bar even higher, the developers have gone into a technical partnership with Goodyear and Jasper Motorsports. Together they've developed a physics model that gives the player the most realistic driving experience ever. All the cars also have an active four-way suspension that shifts the weight of the car from side to side. Players can actually see this while they're driving. The adaptive AI has been greatly improved as well. Not only will competing drivers box you out and bump you out of the race, they will adjust to your skill level automatically. This is the first NASCAR game that has all 2003 drivers, teams and sponsors. All of the 23 tracks of the NASCAR Winston Cup Circuit have been flawlessly recreated in all their glory, complete with grandstands and spectators. Visually, NASCAR Racing 2003 Season cannot be beat. Players are treated to flawless 3D representations of their real-life counterparts. Coupled with real-time reflections and shadows, you will swear you were watching a real NASCAR race. New enhancements for 2003 include a populated pit road with team war wagons and war signs and animated flags. In addition to a solid single-player game, NASCAR Racing 4 also supports multiplayer games with up to 42 racers online. Throw in realistic surround-sound effects, including various engine and skid sounds, and four different camera views and what you have is all the NASCAR you'll ever need.

nascar racing 2003 season play rating

system: **pc** / developer: **papyrus** / publisher: **sierra entertainment** / available: **april**

baseball round-up

words tom ham

Spring is finally here and we all know what that means – it's time for baseball. The 2003 season is upon us and we have checked out the latest and greatest baseball games for all the major platforms. All the key players are here including EA Sports, Acclaim, Sega Sports, Sony and 3DO. So which game hits it out of the park? Which game strikes out? Read o folks, it's time to play ball!

mvp baseball 2003

play rating

system: **playstation 2, xbox, pc** / developer: **ea canada** / publisher: **ea sports** / available: **now**

For 2003, EA Sports has decided to drop the Triple Play name and has renamed its famed franchise MVP Baseball 2003. With a new name comes a totally revamped game; a game that is leaps and bounds better than any of their previous baseball titles. Coolest feature by far — the new pitcher/batter interface. Players actually have control over the effectiveness and accuracy of their pitches dependant on how precise their wind-up and release is. Batting has also been improved. How well you bat is now determined by your player's real life "hot and cold zones," ratings, swing time and swing type. Another key feature is the Franchise mode. We could write a book on how in-depth and robust it is. Together with superlative graphics and great play-by-play commentary, without question, EA's latest baseball title is our choice for best baseball game for 2003.

"Without question, EA's latest baseball title is our choice for best baseball game for 2003."

world series baseball 2k3

play rating

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **visual concepts** / publisher: **sega sports** / available: **now**

Last year, Sega showed the industry that it had what it took to make a good baseball game. For 2003, Sega has upped the ante once again and has developed a near-perfect baseball game. Fielding was an issue last year, but 2K3 showcases better AI and improved fielder controls. New animations such as diving and double play turns allow the player to react more quickly to those hard-hit balls scorching the infield. Base running has also been vastly improved. By giving more control to the player, getting picked off by the pitcher isn't so commonplace anymore. Batting and pitching is still a tense affair, as timing and placement is as key as ever. A major enhancement to 2K3 is the ability to adjust the AI. Players can determine how hard or easy their game is. You can change almost every aspect of the game to your liking. Also new for 2K3 is the ESPN Broadcast Presentation. All the familiar signage, logos, replays, scores and music. World Series Baseball 2K3 is definitely worth checking out.

"For 2003, Sega has upped the ante once again and has developed a near-perfect baseball game."

all-star baseball 2004

play rating

system: **playstation 2, xbox, pc** / developer: **acclaim studios austin** / publisher: **acclaim** / available: **now**

For starters, the list of features for All-Star Baseball 2004 is the most impressive we've seen in a console baseball game. Although the game is not as realistic as High Heat, the gameplay modes alone more than make up for it. Players are treated to a full-on Franchise Mode that also includes all the minor leagues as well. In addition, there are expansion teams, computer trades, rookie signings, free agents, Hall of Fame players and spring training. But what All-Star Baseball 2004 has that no other baseball game does is online gameplay. Not only does this mean head-to-head play online, but think about all the cool downloadable content. This is a first for Acclaim and a feature that is absent from all the other baseball games this year. Other key features include accurate play-by-play commentary that not only keeps up with the action, but will also give historical information about the players and the game. Granted the overall graphical quality isn't as sharp as EA's MVP Baseball, the animations are still quite good and very realistic.

"The list of features for All-Star Baseball 2004 is the most impressive we've seen in a console baseball game."

high heat baseball 2004

play rating

system: **playstation 2, xbox, pc** / developer: **3do** / publisher: **3do** / available: **now**

3DO has built a reputation of putting out the most realistic baseball games with their High Heat series. Unlike other companies that concentrate on visuals, High Heat puts its energies on the fundamentals that make a great baseball game. One of High Heat's strongest areas is gameplay modes — over eleven, including Exhibition, Playoffs, Home Run Derby, All-Star Games, Batting Practice and of course, Career Mode. Although not as deep as EA's MVP or Sega's 2K3, players have access to all player trades, rookies, free agents and farm club development players. Almost every aspect of club management is here and is very easy to use. Another key feature is the realism. Players will perform just like their real-life counterpart. If a player is a heavy hitter in real life, then he will hit accordingly in the game, unlike in some baseball games where having a good twitch finger can help an average hitter become a slugger. Although the visuals don't match its competitors, it still manages to hold well enough on its own.

"High Heat puts its energies on the fundamentals that make a great baseball game."

mlb 2004

play rating

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **989 sports** / publisher: **989 sports** / available: **now**

Hoping to rebuild the once-great MLB franchise is 989 Sports and their latest title, MLB 2004. Noticeably absent on the PS2 until now, MLB 2004 is surprisingly a strong baseball title. Packed with features and options, MLB 2004 has what it takes to play with the big boys. Career mode is incredibly deep. Players can take a player all the way from rookie to Hall-of-Famer. If you feel like working behind the scenes, players can play MLB 2004 from a GM position. Scout out players, sign rookies, trade players and maintain your bullpen. MLB 2004 is one of the few games that has this great option. The pitching and batting interface in MLB 2004 is our least favorite out of all the baseball games reviewed here. Trying to guess where the ball is going to be takes the fun out of batting. Even though the game is not as pretty as MVP or 2K3, MLB 2004 shows great promise for next year.

"MLB 2004 is a surprisingly strong baseball title...packed with features and options."

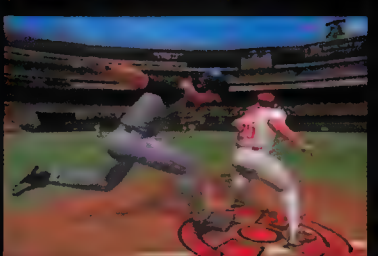
mlb slugfest 20-04

play rating

system: **playstation 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **midway** / publisher: **midway** / available: **now**

With all the baseball simulations out there, it's nice to play a game of arcade baseball that only Midway could deliver. Improving on an already great game, MLB Slugfest 20-04 brings with it a slew of improvements and a host of new features. Absent from last year was the Create-A-Team feature. Here players can create their own All-Star team by taking players from both leagues. Once made, you can try to go all the way to the World Series. Home Run Derby was added to 20-04 as well. But the biggest improvement is the overall visual quality of the game. The players are not only more detailed and have more animations, but each player has their own unique batting stance and pitching motion; just like their real-life counterpart. Audio is still top notch and the play-by-play and color commentary is still one of best we've ever heard. If you're looking for some over-the-top arcade baseball action, MLB Slugfest 20-04 is for you.

"With all the simulations out there, it's nice to play a game of arcade baseball that only Midway could deliver."



Boom shock-a-la-la! This here game is the shizz!

nba street vol.2

words tom ham

"Right when you pop in the game you know you're in for a good time. Talk about a kick-ass party game!"

When the original NBA Street came out back in 2001, it really blew me away. From the over-the-top tricks and the NBA legends to the gamebreakers and funny as hell play-by-play commentary, NBA Street was undoubtedly a great homage to the classic arcade game NBA Jam and I loved every minute of it. Where numerous developers tried to incorporate some sort of "street" element into their basketball games, no one did it quite like NBA Street.

With NBA Street Vol. 2, EA Sports BIG and developer NuFX, Inc. have taken their nearly flawless game and made it that much better, taking it to a whole new level in terms of graphics, gameplay, sound and presentation. This is street hoops yo! And it's dope!

Right when you pop in the game, you know you're in for a good time. There are four modes of play including Pick Up, NBA Challenge, Be A Legend and Street School. The heart and soul of Vol. 2 is the NBA Challenge. Here you'll go against every team in the league as well as NBA Legends and Street Legends. The more you win, the more points you earn. These points can be used to unlock jerseys, players, tricks and moves. New for Vol.2 is the ability to play with four players simultaneously. Talk about a kick-ass party game!

For NBA Street Vol. 2, EA Sports BIG has definitely beefed up the roster this time around. There are 145 NBA Players, 25 NBA Legends and six Street Legends. Newly added this year include Julius Erving, Bill Walton, Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, Dominique Wilkins, Clyde Drexler, James Worthy and many others. You smiling yet? Yeah, I know, so am I.

Another key addition to the game is the new Gamebreaker. Just like the original game, players can build up a Gamebreaker by executing various tricks and dunks, but the cool thing here is now you have a choice. You can either use it right away or you can pocket it—i.e. save it for later on in the game. After you pocket it, you have to build up another Gamebreaker meter. Once you successfully build that up, you can now unleash the Level 2 Gamebreaker—a shot that is unblockable. You can't even steal it. In fact, the game goes into a wickedly cool cut scene that shows your player making the shot. The ball even has a red, white and blue trail following it. Nice touch fellas.

The graphics in NBA Street Vol. 2 have been redone as well. Gone are the cartoon-esqe characters and over-exaggerated bodies of the first game. Instead, the players have a more rendered look and are a lot more realistic. The new moves and animations are simply incredible as well. Although too many to list here, just trust us, you'll be blown away.

From an audio standpoint, NBA Street Vol. 2 is flawless. From the ball bouncing on the court to the rims shaking from a monster dunk, this is street ball at its finest. The soundtrack is kickin too. Artists include Black Sheep, MC Lyte, Nate Dogg, Pete Rock and CL Smooth and a host of others. Nelly even created a song exclusive to NBA Street Vol. 2. Bottom line, NBA Street Vol. 2 is nothing but net, dawg.

This here homie be ballin' and what not. He be like, yo, baldy, your dome is gettin the shine all up in my eyeballs 'n shit...

nba street vol. 2 play rating ●●●●●

system: **xbox, playstation 2, gamecube** / developer: **nufx**/ publisher: **ea sports** / available: **may**

play anime

Kings will be crowned, as the world goes around, from father to son to son

REIGN
THE CONQUEROR

Something tells me that the future success and continued growth of anime in this country is going to benefit greatly from cooperative efforts such as "Reign," especially in drawing wider audiences. Where "SiN" and "Lady Death" (ADV's two joints) are both forged from existing properties, the producers of "Reign" have taken the bold step of re-telling one of the most grandiose stories in world history, that of Alexander the Great.

words dave halverson

"Alexander III, known as The Great (356-323 B.C.), king of Macedon, was the son of Philip II of Macedon, and Olympias, an Epirote princess. His father was pre-eminent for practical genius, his mother a woman of half-wild blood, weird, visionary and terrible; and Alexander himself is singular among men of action for the imaginative splendors which guided him, and among romantic dreamers for the things he achieved. He was born in 356 B.C., probably about October. The court at which he grew up was the focus of great activities, for Philip, by war and diplomacy, was raising Macedon to the headship of the Greek states, and the air was charged with great ideas..." From the Encyclopedia Brittanica. Alexander's life is truly one of almost unimaginable power, glory and strife, but were it not for this sci-fi bent re-telling I'd had never given him a second thought. Oh, the joys of history told through modern entertainment; Birmingham High School, you failed me! For the telling, some of the most creative and influential minds in anime have come together, with character designs from Peter Chung of *Aeon Flux* fame, co-producers Rintaro (Metropolis) and Masao Murayama (TriGun) and Madhouse (Vampire Hunter D Bloodlust) who helm the animation. These people could make a story about paint drying and I'd watch it. Within the revelation-packed first four episodes, which play out with the biblical awe reawakened by Ridley Scott in *Gladiator* (forged of epics like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Ten Commandments*), we are swept away into a world of unimaginable majesty, visualized, scripted and told with its own unique brand of sight and sound. I never even gave notion to the fact that what I was watching was "anime" although it comes directly from the pinnacle of the medium. To transcend the stereotypes and elevate a product to this height I truly commend the team that brought it to fruition. It also bears saying that Tokyo Pop is the perfect vessel for the collection; as they have with their manga, this DVD is done up right, from the packaging to the interface to the extras. Truth be told, I'm a bit put off by its exodus to the Cartoon Network's Adult Swim (anime like this is meant to be seen in its entirety and commercial free; I also imagine they'll have to edit it drastically), but if it opens the door to more people discovering it, so it shall be done. I suppose it's worth a little angst to recruit a few more souls to the virtues of anime.

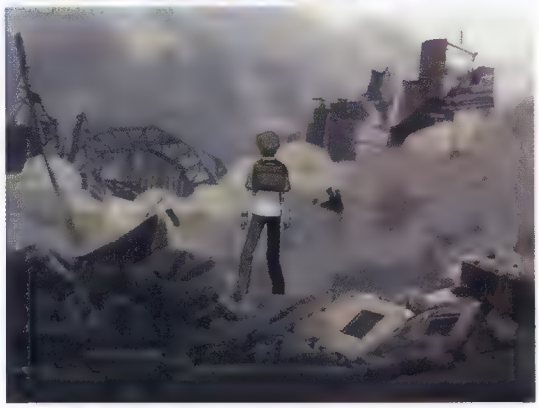
"We are swept away into a world of unimaginable majesty, visualized, scripted and told with its own unique brand of sight and sound."

reign the conqueror vol.1

studio: **tokyopop** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **120 minutes**

play rating ●●●●●

"In his haste to escape the revelations of the day and the horror of his mother's true origin, he generates enough energy 'playing' the RahXephon to pierce the veil..."



The next Evangelion? One can only pray

rahxephon

words dave halverson

ADV may have very well unearthed the next *Evangelion*. I didn't think it was possible to duplicate that level of intoxication, but *RahXephon*, simply put, does. Whether or not it can maintain the same level of intrigue and quality remains to be seen, but if the first disc is any indication, you had better reserve your Quon collectibles today. There's much to love about *Orchestration 1*, but what clinched it for me was the way three friends enter the subway on a day like any other and emerge in the throngs of war. After the train derails (apparently a freak accident), the first few moments after the protagonist, Ayato, emerges are simply riveting, and the revelations have only just begun. Imagine living your life in a city the size of Tokyo, with no idea that it has been literally torn from the Earth by aliens, existing in a different time/space continuum neighboring Earth, which still exists, though ravaged, an invisible barrier away. Beyond the threshold of Tokyo Jupiter, the Earth has been fighting the invaders, called Mu, for 15 years, and suddenly Ayato finds himself a pawn in the war of the worlds. Led by a mysterious beautiful young girl, Reika, to a neo-Egyptian shrine in the heat of the brutal attack, Ayato soon discovers that he is a vessel of sorts—an Orin, able to pilot a massive mech warrior, the RahXephon...his RahXephon. In his haste to escape the revelations of the day and the horror of his mother's true origin, he generates enough energy "playing" the RahXephon to pierce the veil and finds himself on the other side for the first time. Talk about heavy. I haven't been so glued to or intrigued by an anime series since *Evangelion*.

The show's layers and cast of characters already showing incredible promise, it's also shot and drawn to nearly unfathomable standards. Live-action directors wait all day to set up a great shot, and even then rely on perfect conditions, but anime directors have the ability to create shots, and that has never been more evident. RahXephon has the cinematography of a big-budget Hollywood epic, with serene moments, cloudscapes, and vistas that must be seen and felt to be believed...and the background painting is simply exquisite.

Inevitably comparison will be drawn, citing *RahXephon* as an *Evangelion* clone, at least initially, as there are apparently many parallels, although personally I see the overall direction leading down a completely different path. True, the Earth Federation, Terra, is looking a little like NERV in structure; however, the Mu as the opposing alien force seem less steeped in religion than Angels —more alien conqueror then deliverer. I also see shades of *The Matrix* (agent-like assassins leak blue blood), *Minority Report* (pre-cog like humans telepathically control weapons) and even *Stargate*, due to the mech's neo-Egyptian/Greco-Roman design, but these are all welcome bits of flattery. Quon, the quiet, beautiful Orin with similar markings to Ayato, will be likened to Rei and, of course, Ayato to Shinji, dysfunctional family and adoptive hotty included. Me, I'm just floored by it all, overjoyed that another series of this magnitude and beauty exists. With *Hellsing* and *Berserk* winding down, I am in dire need of anything that reaches beyond android puppy love and high school hijinx. I have been delivered. Speaking of being delivered, the producers even managed to sneak in an excerpt from the prayer "Our Father." Hmmm...wonder where that's going.

rahxephon orchestration 1: threshold

studio: **adv films** / rating: **15 & up** / running time: **125 minutes**

play rating ●●●●●

Misou managed all through High School and college without a girlfriend. In fact, a wizened fortune-teller has predicted that it is his doom to be alone for his entire life! When Misou sees the beautiful Nagisa, his heart is awakened for the first time. He has serious competition, however, from the flawlessly handsome Kaizuka and the amazingly ugly Kujira. Misou is determined to succeed, but he is stalled by his knack for ending up in compromising situations with other women at exactly the wrong moment.

What's love got to do with it.

OVA series

If i see you in my DREAMS

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chobits

words dave halverson

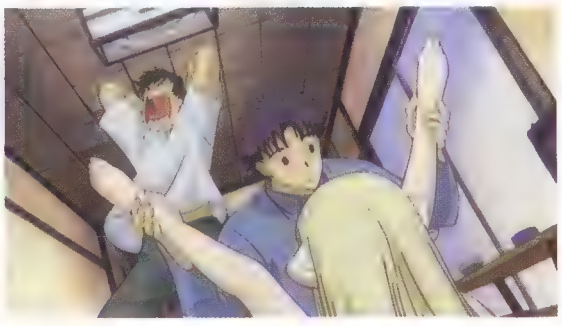
I'm supposed to love *Chobits*. Created by Clamp and brought to life by Madhouse, a more superlative pairing could not be imagined. Plus, the idea of Persocoms, modern-day humanoid PCs that do everything from access the net to complex tasks like house cleaning and menial labor, I find extremely intriguing, even though it's been done to death; there's no denying the recent run on cute android girls falling into the hands of geeky boys, with *Saber Marionette J, Steel Angel Kurumi, Mahoromatic Automatic Maiden*, and *Hand Maid May*. There's always room for more in this saucy category though as long as they offer something new, I suppose.

The catalyst for all these shows is the way in which horny young boys cope with everyday tasks like schoolwork, along with seeing their new robo-babes naked, or perhaps accidentally rubbing up against their soft boobies. We all know full well what would really happen, but, well, that would be considered hentai. I can understand why the creators of these shows toy with human/android sexuality, I only question to what extreme. In *Saber Marionette* and *Mahoromatic*, at least the protagonists sleep and bathe with their androids; in Hideki Motosuwa's case, however, he pops wood holding hands. Raised on a farm (apparently without TV), this nerd defines prude, and while he's at it, silliness and naiveté. Arriving in the big city to attend college, Hideki becomes instantly infatuated with Persocoms, but they're galaxies out of his price range. In a stroke of dumb luck (and *Volume 1*'s best scene) he finds one, half-naked (hot, and cute as a button) in the garbage.

Key players begin to emerge. Hideki's neighbor, a Persocom wiz, helps him initially come to grips with his newfound computer friend, while his cute landlord, a sweet girl with a heart of gold, lends him clothes to dress her. His new employer and his perky daughter are nice to a fault as well, and the local Sebastian (see *Blade Runner*) of the neighborhood — a tiny genius rich-boy surrounded by beautiful hand-made Persocoms to cater to his every whim—helps Hideki discover his Persocoms origins: a rare prototype with unheard of capacity and potential (didn't see that coming). Requisite monkey business ensues.

On the plus side, the look of the show, the soundtrack and the production are great, and the story could very well dive into either sci-fi or mysticism (it is Clamp, after all) and really blossom. On the down side, we could keep swirling down this by-the-numbers spiral, but something tells me (well, a friend did actually) that things are about to shift gears and get really interesting. I do love that these dainty little dolls weigh a ton, and especially where the "on" switch is, so I'm definitely game. The quicker we get past the nosebleeds and dufus bits, the better.

"...he finds one, half-naked (hot and cute as a button) in the garbage."



chobits: persocom vol.1

studio: **pioneer entertainment** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **100 minutes**

play rating

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.hack//SIGN

It's in the game

words dave halverson

Surprisingly, *.hack//SIGN* the anime seems to harness a similar intoxication level as the game, Infection, through the ominous and haunting sense of experiencing a world within our own, capable of breaching the laws of the net and taking over people's minds—like Everquest or PSO, only you never leave (doesn't sound so bad). The World, where all is only as it seems until you logout, like any online game, has its own administration, rules, and guidelines, adhered to by players the world over. But one player in particular, Tsukasa, appears to be unable to log out, and is oblivious to the rules and governing physics of the game. Other players within The World quickly begin to question his abilities and eventually breach his privacy in the real world, attempting to find out who he (or she) really is, the answer of which is both startling and troubling—if it is indeed the answer. Within this framework, key characters are of course introduced and layers begin to emerge, forging a unique storyline that bridges the gap between the gamescape and reality—a fresh coat of paint for the halls of anime storytelling.

Another thing I found was an uncanny desire to play the game the more I watched .hack//SIGN, due to the familiarity of the dungeons, fields, and architecture, which all, of course, mimic Infection. Having the same creative teamwork on both projects has certainly paid off. Of course, it doesn't hurt that they're all legends either, with character designs from Yoshiyuki Sadamoto (*Evangelion*) and a screenplay by *Ghost In The Shell* luminary Kazumnori Ito, and Noir scribe Koichi Mashimo (among others). Episodes 1-5 are heavy on story development and light on action, but that's as it should be. The transfer and overall production are simply impeccable. Even if you're watching *.hack//SIGN* on Adult Swim, I highly recommend picking up the DVDs, as this series, due to its manga/anime/game crossover, is not only highly collectible, but, like all great anime, requires your full attention, sans a word from their sponsors.

"...one player in particular, Tsukasa, appears to be unable to log out and is oblivious to the rules and governing physics of the game."

.hack//sign: login vol.1

studio: **bandai entertainment** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **125 minutes**

play rating

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NOIR

Murder never looked so good

words dave halverson

I've been hearing about *Noir* nonstop for the better part of a year, so my expectations were running high. As a rule, I don't catch fan subs, download DIVX files, or watch anything until it's ready for prime time, so my curiosity was such that it put the neighborhood cats in jeopardy. I'm happy to say that I did fall in love with *Noir*, based on its style, not its substance. To really enjoy this series you have to buy into the whole silent assassin credo. Noir is about what's unsaid—it's a style piece—and speaks through visual presentation. The animation is good with flashes of greatness, but the way in which it's depicted is really the lure of the show.

A reclusive but omnipotent young girl, Kirika, lures a contract killer, Mireille, into her precarious situation through an e-mail and a haunting melody. She's a skilled assassin no doubt, but she's suffering from amnesia, and has no idea who she is, or why she's running for her life. The meeting puts Mireille in harm's way (lots of harm in a very big way); in fact, she's about to meet her maker when Kirika conveniently saves her life. Question number one: should she be thankful or seething? Hearing her plight (barely, Kirika speaks in whispers), Mireille must decide her course of action: accept Kirika as a partner and become Noir—or kill her, then and there. She decides to let her join, but only until they unravel the mystery... "Then I'll kill you," she mutters.

Next, we get a condensed vignette of character development, on par with Natalie Portman and Jean Renos in *The Professional*, before jobs start pouring in, and with them further insight in to why these two have come together. All the while, however, the question looms; to what end? So they can kill each other? Or is there more here, some deep dark secret that will somehow unite them? It's all fuel for the fire—intrigue that escalates steadily throughout these episodes, leaving me on the brink of breaking my golden rule. These two kill with such poise and grace that the act has little consequence to them or us. It's like a death ballet performed on the equivalent of crash test dummies—and what could be more alluring then that?

noir: shades of darkness vol.1

studio: **adv films** / rating: **15 & up** / running time: **125 minutes**

play rating

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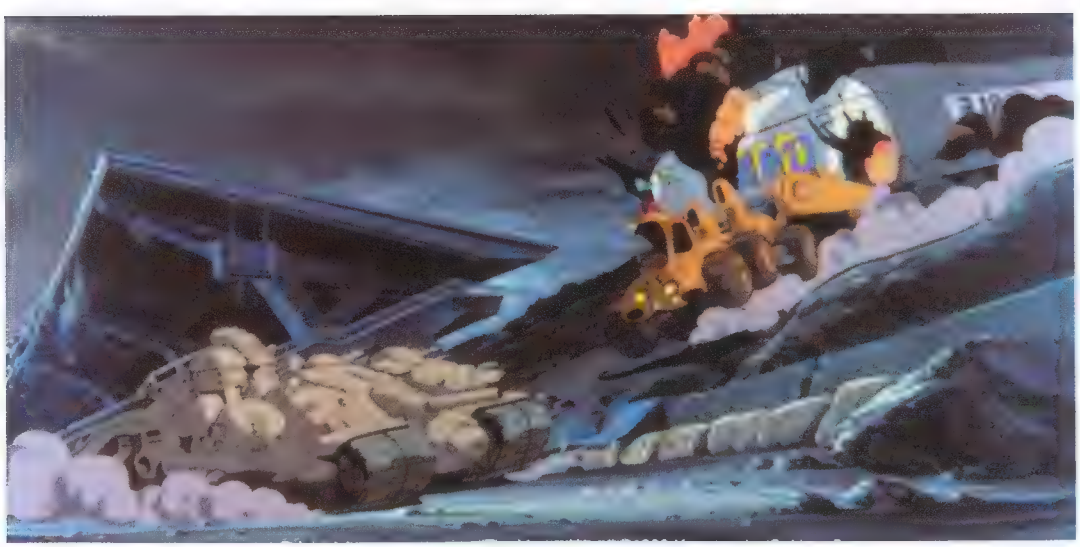
venus wars

For years I have been telling friends and inquisitors to seek out and watch *Venus Wars*. As old-school anime goes, this one ranks right up there with *Battle Angel, Akira, Wings of Honneimase, 3x3 Eyes, Nadia*, and on and on...don't get me started.

I've always had a fascination with stories that chronicle the plight of friends and loved ones living and dying through the hardships of war. The separation anxiety, new relationships and eventual reuniting (God willing)—I figure it's the most alone anyone can ever be, torn from their everyday life and relationships to fight for ideals and purposes beyond their control. What I love so much about this portrayal in particular—that of Hiro, a unicross racer at the top of his game, and Susan Somers a journalist from Earth—is that I was as emotionally invested as I might be watching live-action, if not more so. In fact, I've rarely been as riveted since viewing it for the first time some five years ago. The animation quality and overall production values were truly ahead of their time—no wonder, given its pedigree, with the art direction from *Lupin III: Castle Cagliostro* luminary Shichiro Kobayashi, music by Jo Hisaishi (*Spirited Away, My Neighbor Totoro*) and a story by Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, animation director of *Gundam Perfect Collection* and creator of *Arion*. The opening racing sequence alone touts some of the best sound effects ever recorded, and vehicle designs that to this day remain unmatched. Watching it again to write this review (and celebrate its arrival on DVD, finally), I'm as amazed as ever at how utterly captivating it has remained, a testament to the power of a truly epic animated work. Nobody, anime fan or otherwise, should be without this DVD, which is included in CPM's Dynamite 12 (12 excellent shows for $239.99). Find it, watch it, love it, and thank me later.



"The opening racing sequence alone touts some of the best sound effects ever recorded, and vehicle designs that to this day remain unmatched."

venus wars

studio: **central park media** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **104 minutes**

play rating ●●●●●

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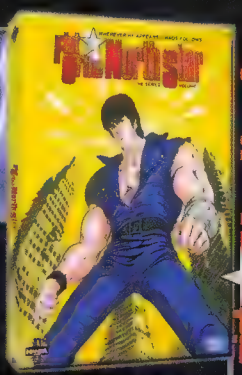

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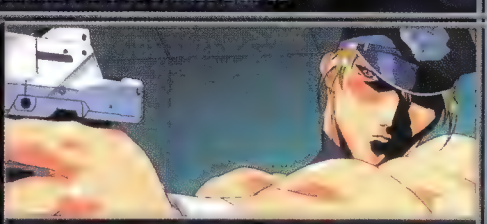

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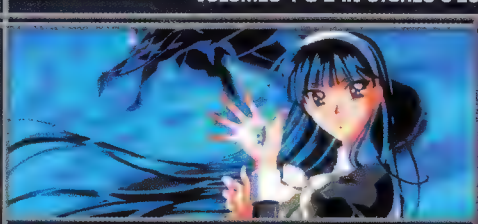

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idol project

words dave halverson

There's always room for fruit! And here's a dose that's sugary and a bit sexy too. In case *Chance Pop Session* didn't float your boat (it sank mine), *Idol Project* may just be your ticket to panty paradise. Squeaky, bouncy, and panty-packed, this little slice of mayhem takes place in a world ruled by Idols to the extent that one in particular, Yuri, the big bright shining star of the world, has been elected President (talk about having your Bush and eating it too). Upon her retirement (Idoling, apparently, is hard work), Yuri assembled a cabinet of six idols to protect the world from nastiness and oversee the annual festivities of the Golden Mic awards, where one lucky new idol will be chosen to sing in the Crystal Hall—a cross between Madison Square Garden and Liberace's living room. Mimu Emilton, Idol-in-training extraordinaire, whose dream it is to claim the prize, soon finds herself not only in the company of greatness—tumbling through the first episode's Alice in Wonderland-like scenarios—but ultimately literally entwined in her dream (in fact, she may be lodged between some breasts and a thigh or two).
Sort of like Marionettes, only kookier, the Idols are as follows: Ruka's small and bubbly; Extra is the heavy metal queen; Layla's something of a female Elton John; Corvette is the company nymph; Pal-Pu is a Devil Hunter Yoko-like warrior; and Shion, a badass ninja babe, complete with entourage. So you see where this is going. The enemy is even weirder. As you can see, the art style by Suzuki Noritaka (*Wild Cardz*) is pure guilty pleasure and, as I said, if you like it bubbly…well, do not shake before opening.

idol project: starland festival vol.1

studio: **anime works** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **60 minutes**

play rating

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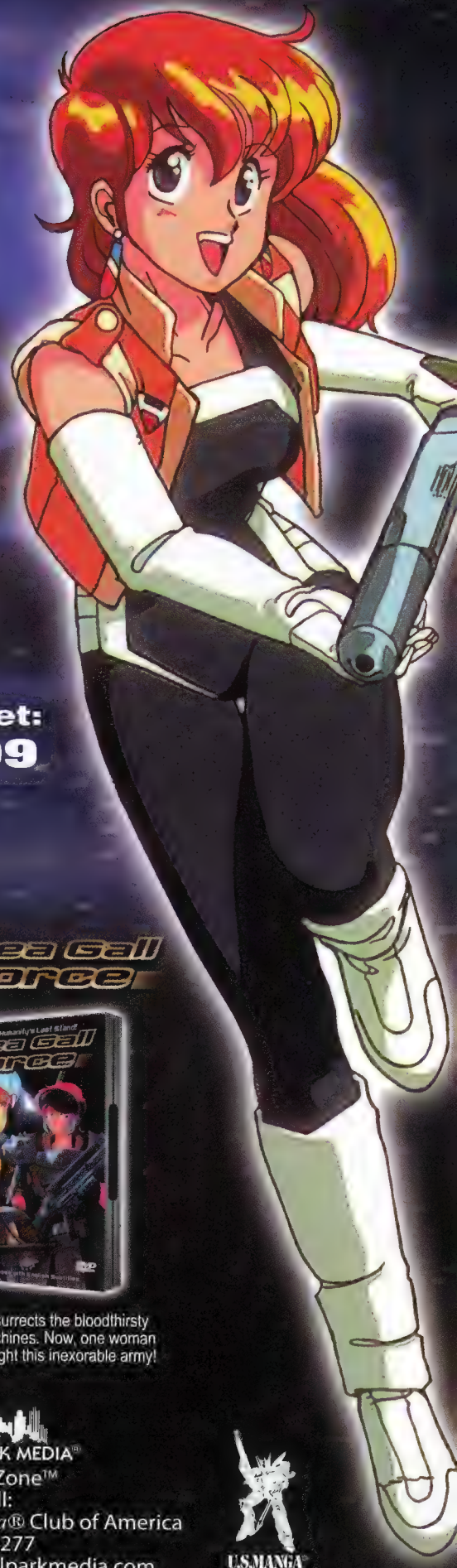

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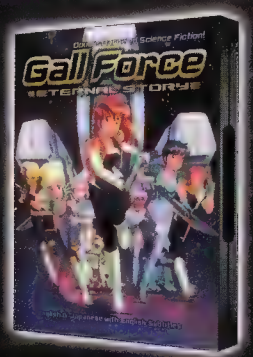

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Fist of the North Star

studio: manga entertainment
rating: 13 & up
running time: 75 minutes

It's old. And the story: as generic as they get in the anime kingdom. All those anime clichés...half of them were born right here. In a post-apocalyptic world devoid of law, ruled by bloodthirsty killers that make Thunder Dome look like summer camp, Kenshiro walks... All that he had remaining in the wake of global destruction — his beloved Yuria — was ripped from his arms and made to watch as his nemesis Shin poked him full of holes and left him for dead. Now he wanders the land looking for revenge at the end of a hundred-hand crack. Standing in his way are armies of large, evil men that can't seem to stop doing bad things to nice people and Ken just ain't havin' it, which is where the first major difference resides in Manga's cleaned-up, newly re-mastered and somewhat re-told version. Where Ken was somewhat reserved and brooding in past dubs, he's now apparently working for Don King. The man is downright cocky, calling out moves like Mike Tyson at a midget toss. Outnumbered and especially outweighed (apparently nuclear fallout causes men to grow to immense proportion and grow Mohawks), Ken dispenses the Hakuto Shinken — serious whoop-ass that causes a time-delayed outward explosion of the guts — and everyone he touches gets blowed up real good. If you like your anime with sauce, you have most definitely arrived. When you get right down to it, Fist offers little more; Ken's wily sidekick is worth hating and the little girl he saves plays a swell beacon of hope, but mostly it's just really cool seeing a-holes explode. Brought to America in its entirety for the first time, as spiffed up as it's ever going to get, if you're looking for a dose of serious old-school ass-kicking kung-fu action, this 36-episode TV series is as bad (and expletory) to the bone as it gets. If I had a dollar for every exclamation point, I could build a park next to Michael's. "Furious Death of Five Exploding Fingers!!" You go, Ken.

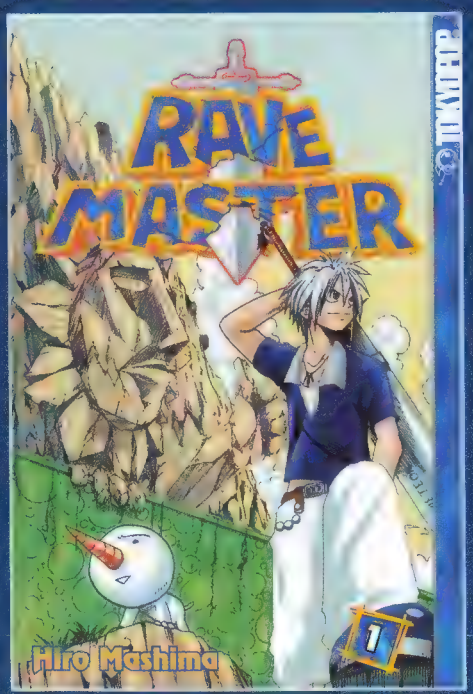
DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●

read me file

tokyopop: manga maniacs

Manga, like anime, is sweeping the nation, thanks in no small part to Tokyo Pop, who have taken the art of manga in America as seriously as its benefactors in Japan, presenting their books in traditional reverse fashion and assembling them with an emphasis on quality. Since many manga eventually make the transition to anime, there's no better way to pre-empt your viewing pleasure or find out where a series is going before you pick up the DVD. Manga just looks cool to have around too, and truth be told, there really is no better reading. Next to American comics, well, I have to say manga smokes 99% of what's happening here. Of course Tokyo Pop isn't the only company producing manga in America, but to kick off our requested manga section (snazzy title, eh?), we thought we'd start with the best, and right now they have some seriously cool books out there (available wherever manga is sold — we like Suncoast). This month we're recommending Rebirth, a tale of the vampire Deshwitat and his revenge on the Sorcerer Kalutika who slays his beloved Lilith and then seals him away for centuries. Waking up in a new modern world, the battle begins anew, revealing a dark tale that begs to be exiled from its book form. The character design, detail and overall look of this manga are extraordinary. On the lighter side (well, somewhat) Rave Master plays out like a video game with a 16-year-old boy seeking five Rave Stones to defend his home island from the evil society Demon Cards and the destructive power Dark Bring. Trust us, there's an RPG in here somewhere. Stay tuned for more cool manga each month in the Play Read Me File!



Two assassins in search of the past.
To hear their name is to know fear;
To see their face is to know death.
NOIR
Le noir, ce mot désigne depuis une époque lointaine le nom du destin
Les deux vierges régnent sur la mort
Les mains noires protègent la paix des nouveaux-nés.
The most anticipated anime release of 2003 is coming to DVD on February 18
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playback

write and win!

If we choose your correspondence as our "letter of the month," you'll receive a one year subscription to **play** magazine, gratis. Give us your best thoughts.

letters@playmagazine.com

letter of the month

I found your magazine a few weeks ago, the issue with the Primal cover. It's great to find a magazine that approaches games as an art form, rather than trying to be "Games for Men" (though you do have your share of pin-ups). It's nice to occasionally see writing that is earnest and sincere. I'm trying to avoid games for a few months but you have completely sold me on the GameCube. Mostly via the Mario and Zelda coverage. It was great to finally see some coverage confirming, at least in one case, my belief that every activity has an art to it. So I'll keep reading, mostly because the tone of your coverage is perfect. Not only perfect, but with layout that captures and emphasizes that approach. And the anime section is a great bonus.

In the spirit of being harsh when aware something could be done better, the editing needs work. I really dislike seeing words misspelled, missing letters and sentences that do not make sense. I had hoped that it would be a fluke, but having picked up a second issue yesterday (by the way, the Link cover? I couldn't say no to him) it's clear that there is a lot of room for improvement. My problem is that even with all these errors **play** is by far the best games magazine I've found. So I'll keep reading as long as **play** continues to be about games and not about selling greater quantities of games regardless of quality. So, thanks for caring, keep up the good work, and see you next month.

Isaiah W.

Isaiah,
Well, thank you — it's nice to hear that we're being perceived as we intend... Now about those typos...You'll be happy to hear that when I close this document, before it enters Mr. Hobbs' neighborhood, I'll be whisking it away to our new proofreader. [Editor's Note: Arg, the pressure!] Yes, we finally have a bona fide copy editor. Scary, isn't it? Funny thing is, last month we typed in the headers after he proofed the body copy...and crunch time took its toll and we misspelled Berserk in the Anime Year in Review...and it's, like, a 20-point font. All we could do was laugh (well, maybe I cried a little). We lost the formatting on Ghost Ship as well, and lost half a sentence...so things might still slip in, but we promise, we're getting better. One of these days, I swear, we're going to have a clean issue, and then, I'm going to sleep.

adam cubed

As an avid video game player and current owner of the top five gaming platforms (PC, PS2, Xbox, GameCube, and Game Boy Advance), I have to say that the GameCube is the overall winner. Now that more games are available, it is my console of choice. The graphics on this machine are remarkable, especially the colors, and the classic Nintendo characters are hard to beat (Mario, Zelda, Metroid, Starfox). Although the Xbox has the best hardware, the games pretty much suck, except for Halo and Splinter Cell, and Nintendo has answered that call with Metroid Prime and the news of Splinter Cell being released for the Cube. PS2 just doesn't have it in the graphics department anymore. About the only thing it has going for it is less expensive games and Grand Theft Auto (which I don't play due to the fact that stealing cars and killing rampages are not the best way to fantasize, which is all we are doing when we play games anyway). The PC still rocks, but only for real-time strategy games and multiplayer first-person shooters. Well that's my two cents worth; you guys have an awesome magazine that stands shoulders above the rest of the crappy game/code magazines out there.

Sincerely,
Adam C.

"As an avid video game player and current owner of the top five gaming platforms, I have to say that the GameCube is the overall winner"

Adam,
Halo and Splinter Cell do rock, but so do GunValkyrie, JSRF, Kung Fu Chaos, Panzer... Indeed, the GameCube is a beautiful thing when games are created specifically to its specs, and those first-party characters are like our extended family. It's a shame, however, that more third parties don't take advantage of its power (you're going to love NEC's Tube Slider...talk about graphics). Just curious, did you factor in third-party support when you made your choice? We're finding that most people really look to the first-party stuff when they're deciding on a new console. Bet you can't wait for Wario World...it's from Treasure, you know. Still, don't sell the PS2 short. Have you seen Ratchet & Clank, or Primal? And wait until Jak & Daxter 2 gets out... The big three are all cranking out justice, my friend, and when you get right down to it, that's what really makes life worth living; well, that and hot women (or men for you ladies) and fast cars (or for the girls...I think it's the shoes).

herd that!

Recently I've been spending my off hours trying to wake my father up...however it seems that to do this I have to herd funny little creatures into pens (now if I could just take away that damn Gromp's fishing pole...Wait! I know, I can lead him to another Gromp, and while they're fighting it out, I'll lead my Doops to safety!). Now, when I'm not herding Doops and Bleeps I often spend my time bashing the shit out of anything and everything conceivably destroyable with my favorite diskarmor (bash those pillars!) all the while trying to save princess Harmonia from the clutches of the titans...

But let's talk anime. I was at Hastings last week when I noticed that they had the *Blue Seed Perfect Collection*. For about $35 you get four DVDs, each with about seven episodes. I really like how they did this because when I bought the *Lain* four-disc box set it cost me $112. What ADV did instead is put the entire 26 episodes in a four-disc DVD case instead of packaging them each in their own case and putting them all in an art box. Very cool since you get all four for the price of one! Oh yeah, before I forget, I noticed that in your 2002 anime year in review, you did not have a Best Musical Score like you did for the games. Now I don't know about you, but the first time I watched *Escaflowne* the movie in DTS 5.1 surround sound...Holy SHITE! I almost didn't care about the movie as long as the music kept playing! I loved the *Cowboy Bebop* jazz but it didn't enchant me like *Escaflowne* did. For that matter no other anime (or even most live action movies for that matter) has had the effect that *Escaflowne* had on me; I will never view soundtracks the same, and *Escaflowne* is the standard by which I shall judge all others.

Stewart M.

Stewart,
I see you've crossed over. So, you're seeing Doops...feel the sudden urge to herd neighboring pets? Actually, we're working on cross breeding experiments now, hoping to jump-start the Doop industry. Herdy Gerdy gets under your skin, doesn't it — God, I love that game! As for Rygar, well, it defies description. You're right about *Escaflowne*, too. That's a spectacular soundtrack, so consider it the winner... Ain't 5.1 the shiznit? We too like the ADV box set concept, although some sort of extra goodie in the box would be nice, don't you think? They're pretty brown-bag once you crack them open. You may want to check out *Blue Seed 9* on the Saturn, by the way, if you're into the anime, and of course have a converted Saturn (doesn't everyone?). It's a pretty cool top-down RPG with fantastic art

play MEDIA

ren and stimpy strike back

If you've never seen Ren and Stimpy, why? The rest of us know why the first is subversive, so-offcenter it's magically mind-cartoon fresher is a classic. Now the creator John K is going pure ad[illegible] with a new Ren and Stimpy. Prepare yourself.

interview by brady fiechter

Ren and Stimpy certainly carries a tone, goes places nothing else out there does. Are you ever tempted to go so far overboard and you just say, "F* it"?**
John Kricfaluci: [Laughs] Well, we did it a whole bunch of times this year, and amazingly, some of it got through. Now I'm even worried.

Before *South Park, Beavis and Butthead*, before the more subversive and adult cartoons came out, you guys were the first to do it. How is the creative environment? Hasn't it certainly changed a lot since then?
Especially since we're on prime time now, on TNN. It's not for kids at all.

Do you find it hard or frustrating to get people to recognize that what you're doing has a great place in society, especially now? It can be so hugely popular and successful for the right reasons.
Well, the fact that we're making the show answers that. No, I didn't have to convince anybody, TNN called me up, and they just asked me, "Do you want to do a show, and this time do it for adults?"

Awesome. So what's the status on *Ripping Friends*? Is it going to continue to get your attention?
Right now it's not getting any attention, because we haven't raised the money yet to produce the second series.

But you are looking to do that?
Yes.

What about gaming. Do you delve into video games at all?
Unfortunately, I don't know anything about video games.

But what if someone came to you and wanted your involvement? Way back in the day, they made a great Ren and Stimpy game. Maybe if someone came to you to write a script for the Ren and Stimpy game, would you be interested?
I've actually amazingly never played a video game. The last game I played was Pong. And I was on acid.

Well that must have made it pretty good.
That was in the '70s. But yeah, I would write some video games [laughs], even though I've never played one.

Speaking of acid tripping…what's your inspiration here? You go back to some of the earlier Ren and Stimpy episodes…one of my favorites was when Stimpy transferred his butt fat to Ren's pecs, who then takes off to Hollywood to model and make it and leaves his best friend behind. So how do you come up with this? Do you just sit and think of the most deliriously fun ideas you could possibly muster?
The ideas come from everywhere. That particular one, Ren's pecs…we had just read something about people getting pectoral transplants. We didn't even have to make that one up. People actually do that: take their butt fat and put it in their tits [chuckles].

Isn't it amazing the kind of humor you can find in everyday occurrences?
I couldn't make up anything that funny.

You need to come up with a Botox episode. So what do think of the animation quality of Ren and Stimpy?
Depends on what aspect of the animation. Television animation isn't really animation. It's more in-between than it is the animation.

To me, most of what I like comes from the writing anyway. And with you guys, nobody comes up with anything like this.
Well, in our case, a lot of the humor is visual. It's both. We do verbal humor, plot humor, and visual humor. The animation is done in Korea. Although we have one studio in Canada called Carbunkle, run by Bob Jaques. That's his studio. Great animation.

What do you like out there? Are there any cartoons in particular you like? Anything that's going on that impresses you.
Bugs Bunny does. *Popeye* does.

The good stuff. It sounds like you're not a modern-day cartoon connoisseur.

I don't even think what they make today is a cartoon. It doesn't have anything to do with cartoons. They're radio shows with pictures to go with them.

It's a bit sad too, because everyone remembers the days growing up, like you said, watching the classics like Bugs and Popeye. There's not enough really good stuff for kids growing up.
Well, Cartoon network plays all the classic cartoons. You can see black and white *Popeye* and all the *Bugs Bunny* cartoons, all the Looney Tunes.

It's hilarious to watch the propaganda-laden stuff.
Yeah, I love that stuff...

You know, considering the times, it's hard not to avoid the political discussions. Do you find yourself ever politically motivated? Do you draw the line to bringing in the subversive, political stuff?
I guess I do sometimes. But not necessarily current events. It's more like philosophically political. It's not politically correct. It's the opposite of politically correct.

Thank God for that!
Bury that shit completely.

Yeah, so what's the deal with political correctness?
[Laughs] It's a conspiracy. The whole naming business of political correctness. They've started a whole thing where they've completely subverted the English language. Where they make up terms for things that are the opposite of the meaning of them. Like political correctness. Everything that's incorrect they call politically correct.
You can't say retarded anymore, or handicapped. You have to say exceptional children. No, no, no. Wait a minute. Exceptional means better. Nobody wants to be a retard. It's f***ing ridiculous.

But nobody would ever say it.
Call them retarded. That's the word for it. Don't take a word that means something else and change the word...
Call it what it is. And we do this over and over and over again. Friendly fire. What the f*** is friendly fire?

Ok...
Hey, my pal! just killed me! Thanks a lot, buddy, what can I do for you?

What can you do for me? Dude, you have to make a movie. You're obviously held back by the network. And you've got opinions to share!
Well, [Nickelodeon and The New TNN animation publicist] Nicole will arrange that. If Nicole gives me the go-ahead, we're gone.

In a perfect world, it would be that easy. It's in the cards. No, seriously, what is in the cards? Is it all Ren and Stimpy right now?
That's the main thing. That's what I'm doing 12 hours a day: *Ren and Stimpy*. We had to start a studio from scratch up here in Canada, plus we have one in LA. There are so many drawings on the damn show, and I'm such a stickler for making every drawing funny. It's just a lot a lot of work.

Sounds like you really relish doing this though.
I like the results. I like the initial part, where you write the show and come up with ideas. That's the most fun part. Production is really hard. Kind of grueling.

Your stuff draws a unique fan base. I know there's a lot of cool things dissected on the Internet. Do you look at all this, do you find it fulfilling at all?
My dad actually goes to all those places and tells me about them. I don't hang out there. There's other stuff on the Internet, thanks.

So what can we expect from the new show? Is the tone similar to the original? Will we see the return of Log? Like jingles coming back?
We haven't had time in any of the shows to do the bumpers yet. We want to do them, but the shows are all coming out long. We will manage to get some in, but they won't be directed at kids, they'll be more adult products: Powdered Toast Man now, instead of selling breakfast cereal, he sells Powdered Toast Rolling Tobacco.

That's awesome. You know, you had to be hand-tied on the original Ren and Stimpy. Hearing you talk, I can just see you...
In reality, we weren't at all. No, you have to remember, what I came from working on were the worst cartoons in history. '80s cartoons. *The Smurfs. Gary Coleman Show. He Man. G.I. Joe* [laughs].

They were great, weren't they?
God-awful crap. The worst cartoons ever. So when we started up with Nicktoons, I was the most radical guy in cartoons, that's for sure. But they were going for most of it. The amazing thing was that the show ever got on the air. I tried to sell that show to every other network. ABC, NBC, CBS. Of course they were terrified, because I would go farther than anyone could ever imagine. But they still let 90 percent of it go through. So no, my hands weren't tied. That was the freest I ever was.

So fast-forward to present day. Are you going to be considered radical again? Is this show going as far as it possibly can?
Well, the funny part is, I don't even think of it that way.

Sounds like you just create, it just happens.
It does. It's just what me and my friends think is funny.

Ok, one last question. Is Muddy Mudskipper coming back?
Not in this season. He may come back later. To tell you the truth, I never liked Muddy Mudskipper.

Come on, you weren't a big Muddy Mudskipper fan?
No, I hated him. Because he was a compromise. It was supposed to be Huckleberry Stumptail McCrack... We'll do some of the ideas we couldn't do the first time around.

What about Dr. Stupid?
He's in one of the episodes for a short stint.

So you're definitely returning... It sounds like you're borrowing some of what sticks out in the original.
Well, we're not trying to imitate the first show, trying to recapture what was there by looking for a formula, because there never was a formula. The only formula is that it's a show about two characters and their personalities first. Otherwise, everything else goes.

Not sticking to any convention, don't you have to dig deeper to make this stuff work?
Well, the story part is super easy. I never have problems coming up with stories for *Ren and Stimpy*. Like I said, the producing part, that's the hard part. Because a lot of the concepts, believe it or not, although they may seem to be about farts and boogers, it's really tricky to pull off visually. There's a lot of skill and sophistication in the execution of it. That's the hard part. The ideas are easy. Making it work is the hard part.

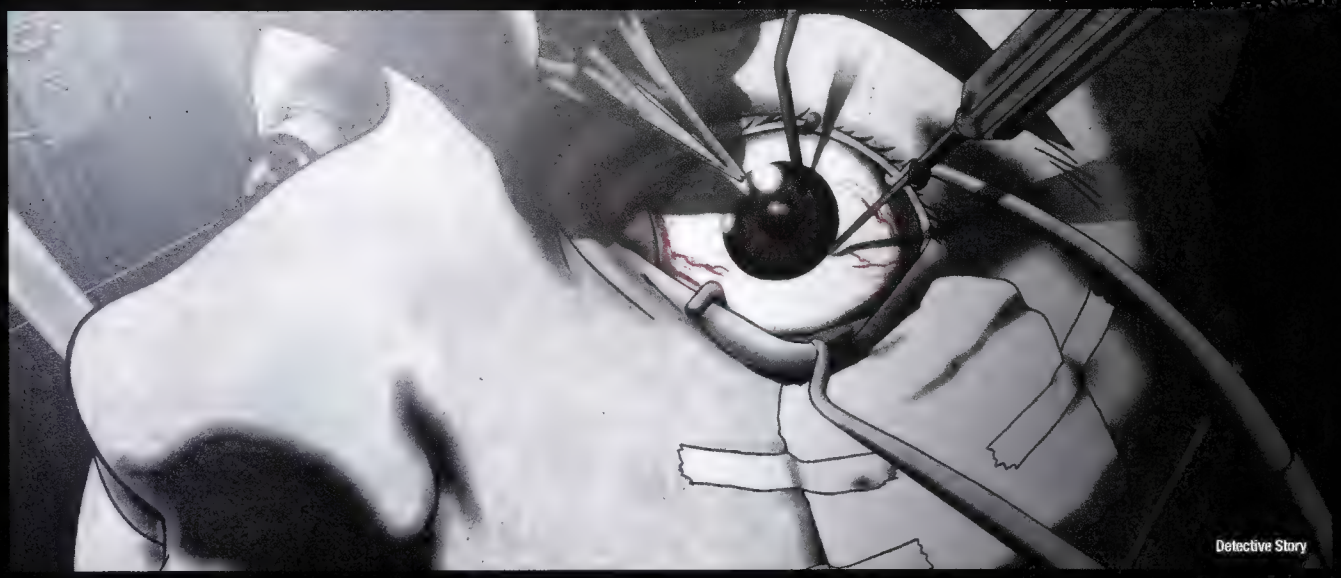
Hey, in the end it works. That's all that matters.
I hope so.

"I don't even think what they make today is a cartoon. It doesn't have anything to do with cartoons. They're radio shows with pictures to go with them."

the animatrix

The Matrix meets Japan

words brady fiechter



Detective Story

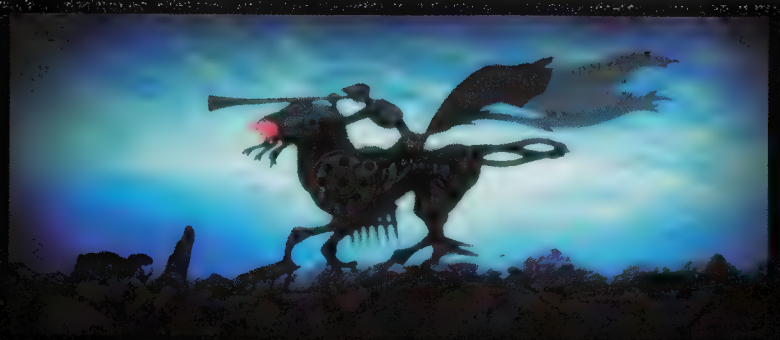
Manufactured, artificial humans will someday improve our quality of life. They will comfort us and greet us after a long day at work. When we need a nice meal and a clean living quarters, they will scurry to the task without complaining. They will become our friends. Eventually, they will feel what we feel, understand the world as we do, learn to love as we do. If we are their creator, planting in them the same seed of life that was given to us, will there not grow a sanctity for life?

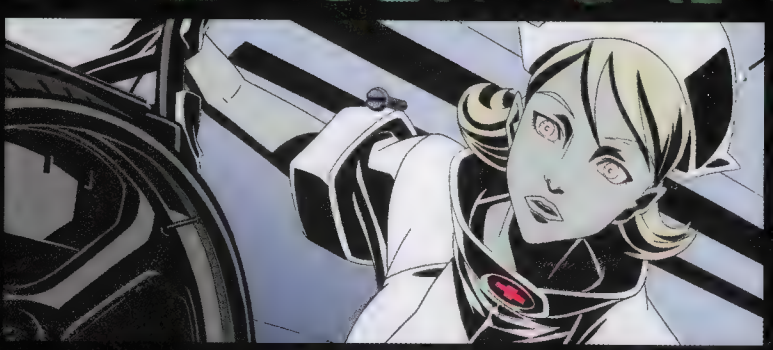
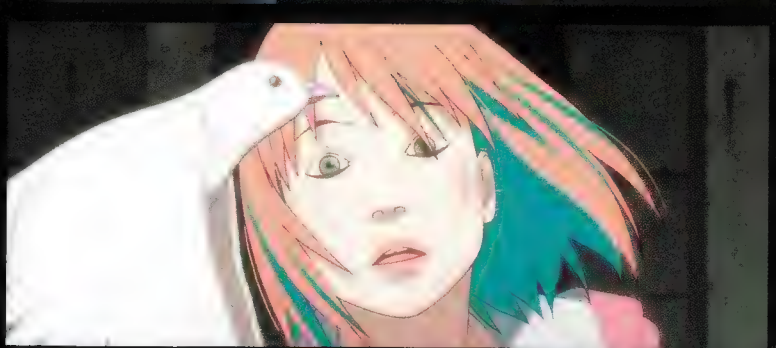
Fiction has explored the profound possibilities of androids and their place in our future, but rarely with such poignancy and raw intensity as in *The Second Renaissance—Parts I and II*, one of nine anime shorts dreamed up by the Wachowski brothers, directors of the *Matrix* trilogy. The Wachowski duo wrote *The Second Renaissance, Flight of the Osiris* and *Kid's Story*, leaving the rest of the intriguing works in the writing and directorial hands of renowned anime creators responsible for such classics as *Ghost in the Shell, Evangelion, Ninja Scroll* and *Cowboy Bebop*.

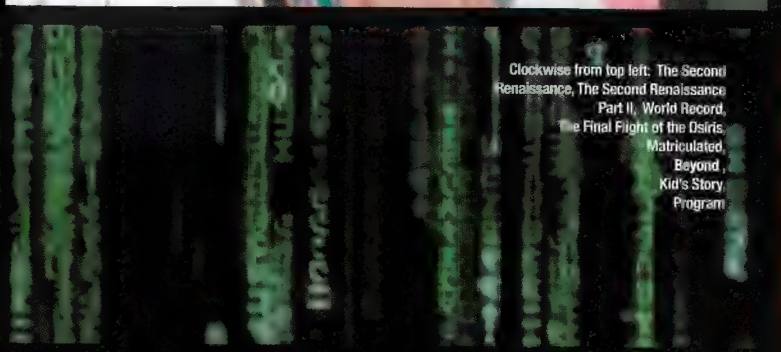
Known as *The Animatrix*, this entire collection will be packaged for DVD release on June 3, but before it comes home, several of the shorts will pop up online and as trailers in the theater. The project was conceived by the Wachowskis more than three years ago, born out of the brothers' respect for Japanese animation and the desire to see visions from the Matrix universe reimagined and interpreted through "shared world" storytelling. Weaved into the films are bits and pieces that tie into The Matrix trilogy, revealing figures who will appear in the upcoming sequel and subtle answers into the existence and origin of *The Matrix*. There are dark, disturbing moments in some of these shorts, especially the ones written by the Wachowski Brothers, which prompts the question: have the filmmakers taken *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* into much more challenging, riskier territory? These themes introduced in *The Animatrix* are nothing new, but they're presented in a way that cuts deep; here's to no compromise.

"Fiction has explored the profound possibilities of androids and their place in our future, but rarely with such poignancy and raw intensity as in *The Second Renaissance*."

Matriculated





Clockwise from top left: The Second Renaissance, The Second Renaissance Part II, World Record, The Final Flight of the Osiris, Matriculated, Beyond , Kid's Story, Program

harry potter and the chamber of secrets

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warner bros.

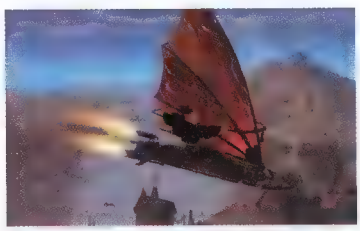
The legendary kid wizard is back and better than ever. The eagerly awaited sequel has arrived on DVD, bringing with it enough cool features and extras to paste a smile on the chilly mug of Professor Snape. This second film has all the familiar faces returning to Hogwarts, all a little older and a bit wiser. When the writing on the wall appears in blood, you know trouble is afoot: The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. An evil monster set free, our fearless trio set off to investigate. Although the material is very kid-centric, *Chamber of Secrets* is pleasantly dark and sinister. I found myself enjoying this film even more so than the first. I don't know…there is something about flesh-eating spiders that just seems cool. The DVD is really top notch, a true masterpiece of design and functionality, utilizing One VoiceDVD technology, which allows the user to navigate through the extras and access set top features using only their voices. In addition there are 19 additional/extended scenes, exclusive interviews with the cast and author J.K. Rowling, guided tours of Dumbledore's office, Diagon Alley and, of course, the Chamber of Secrets. Well done, Mr. Potter, well done indeed. *–Tom Ham*

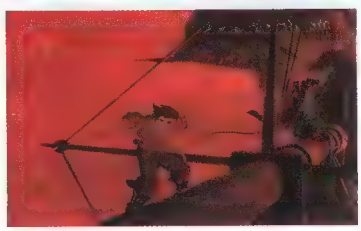
treasure planet

●●●◖

disney

I fear for animation in this country. It used to be where, if a film was animated—especially if it skewed wide—that was reason enough to partake in it. Yet, while animation has gotten better and better—and more expensive to produce—audiences have dwindled. Unless it's considered a free space for screaming children, adults aren't showing up for it, and it's just sad. That said, *Treasure Planet* is no *Titan A.E.*, but it's a beautiful and entertaining if not somewhat off-the-shelf adventure. I mean, c'mon, it's *Treasure Island*: boy is full of promise, boy loses father, boy becomes a derelict, boy goes on voyage of discovery, boy saves the world. In between, you've got the token take-him-under-your-wing guy, the kinda good/kinda bad guy (John Silver), the really bad guy that always gets it in the end (Scroop), the sidekicks (Morph and B.E.N.), and of course good ol' Mom. All of these characters are wisely not voiced by recognizable actors (thank you for that, Disney), save for David Hyde Pierce, who nauseates here just as well as he does on TV. All of these characters are drawn and animated to perfection and merged with beautifully veneered 3D as they whisk through the galaxy in search of lost treasure. The story moves along at a brisk clip, there's no gaiety in terms of singing interludes, Morph and B.E.N. provide classic comedy relief, and, well, it tanked at the box office. It's still harder to believe that *Titan* tanked, as it had a story to match its majesty, but I'm in mourning nevertheless. Not to be discouraged, Disney has still delivered a DVD as deep as a well, including everything you could possibly want to know about the making of this gorgeous film. *–Dave Halverson*





The bloody writing is on the wall. A darker, more sinister Potter should appease his growing (up) fan base

the ring

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dreamworks

What makes *The Ring* such a chilling movie is how it manages to quietly shake you by planting its simple yet disturbing imagery in surprise, cleverly stylized ways. Based on the popular Japanese novel and film, *Ringu*, *The Ring* tells the story of Rachel Keller (the luscious Naomi Watts), a typically inquisitive reporter investigating the mysterious death of her niece, who died exactly seven days after watching a creepy videotape of shadowy, seemingly random images. Intrigued by the stories surrounding this and other similar incidents, Rachel tracks down the video, ultimately putting herself and her loved ones in severe jeopardy. Director Gore Verbinski (*Mouse Hunt*) doesn't go for cheap scares, building his wildly disturbing images to a suprise climax. The visions on the videotape alone are creepier than any horror film this year. And bringing it home in style, the DVD rocks. It includes a 15-minute experimental short film that reveals more electrifying secrets about "the Ring." What's interesting to note here is that the short film is not a collection of previously unused material. Verbinski filmed it exclusively for the home video release. Optimized for widescreen televisions, the film transfer is excellent. *–Alex Castillo*

the transporter

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fox

Produced and co-written by Luc Besson (*La Femme Nikita, The Professional, The Fifth Element*), this testosterone-infused action ride is one huge guilty pleasure. *The Transporter* stars Jason Statham (*Snatch, Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*) as Frank Martin, a wheelman with no fear. Used to transporting dangerous and illegal goods with no questions asked, his criminal world changes when he accidentally opens his latest package for delivery, finding the alluring Lai (Qi Shu) tied up in the trunk. From here, the movie takes off in as straight a path possible: Martin beats the crap out of the folks responsible for the little mixup i an effort to save both their lives. Pretty thin storyline? You betcha; I'm willing to bet the story was written and changed as the movie was being filmed. But hey, I really enjoyed *The Transporter*—the car chases, the fistfights and the gun battles, all over the top and a lot of fun to watch. Sure it's not the deepest of movies, but you'll love every minute of it. And even though the DVD is slim on features and extras, it does have 15 minutes of never-before-seen footage that didn't make it to the theatre. In addition there are deleted scenes, a "Making of" documentary and commentary by Jason Statham and director Corey Yuen. *–TH*

the family guy vol. 1

●●●

fox

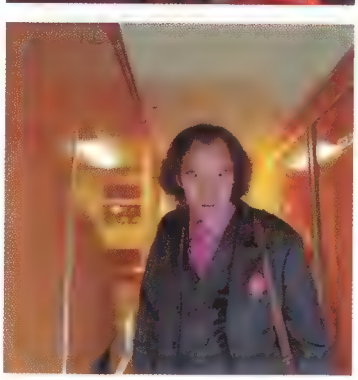
Being a huge fan of *The Simpsons* for many years, I have to say I'm kinda over them now. Although it's great that the series recently celebrated their 300th episode (kudos to Matt Groening), you have to admit it, the past few seasons just haven't been up to snuff. Back in 1999, Fox debuted a new animated series based on a dysfunctional family, *The Family Guy*. Granted it's not the cult phenomenon that is *The Simpsons*, but it is what that show used to be – cutting edge satire mixed with slapstick comedy. Peter Griffin (voiced by creator Seth McFarlane) is an absolute idiot, a laugh riot from start to finish. Throw in a sensible wife (Lois), a nerdy teenage daughter (Meg), a totally clueless teenage boy going through puberty (Chris) and a talking dog (Brian), and you have the makings of one of the funniest shows on television. The best character was Stewie, their sadistic baby bent on destroying the world (he actually talks with a British accent). Quite honestly, there isn't one bad episode in this brilliant box set. However, when it comes to features and extras, it's kinda bare. Although there is a commentary for each episode by several key folks (including McFarlane and many of the voice actors), there isn't much of anything else. No "Making of" featurettes, interviews or outtakes. Hopefully they'll have these in Volume 2.–*TH*

the truth about charlie

●◖

universal

The Truth About Charlie is one of the most uniquely bad lavish films I've seen in not long enough. The actors fail to find a single interesting word to speak, obviously, because they look depressed mired in the dialogue. Shot on location in Paris, The Truth About Charlie resembles a Showtime special that can't quite shake its plastic wrapper. A comatose Mark Walberg plays the shady love interest of a dull Thandie Newton, whose character is accused of murdering her husband but couldn't possibly be guilty because she's too nice and innocent. Or is she? Or do we care? It wouldn't be so bad if there were something special to look at, something visual exciting to wrap ourselves around, but even the chase scenes are boring and tediously inane. The off-putting style director Jonathan Demme chooses, throwing the camera around with a handheld harshness, eventually drops the film dead in its sloppy tracks. –*BF*



red dragon

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universal

Hannibal Lecter is one of the most distinctly evil movie villains of our time. Anthony Hopkins, as he has from the start, brings this evil bubbling to the surface in convincingly disturbing fashion, as *Red Dragon* opens with Lector intellectualizing as a civilian at his lavish home with FBI agent Will Graham (Edward Norton)—one of the film's best of a few chillingly effective scenes. No sooner than the film bolts ahead does it crash into heavy-handed psychological horror: the dialogue is goofy at times, the imagery forced if not at least interesting. It's not easy taking such a respected original work as *Silence of the Lambs* and mining it for anything left to form a competent prequel. The movie is ultimately strained and reaching to keep the intrigue of the Hannibal character alive. Ralph Fiennes goes for pure psychosis and reaches it with a creepy hollowness in the new villain Francis Dolarhyde, known as the Tooth Fairy, but to what end? Unspeakable acts have been inflicted on Tooth Fairy and of course he is tortured and must turn the tables. He finds a sympathetic lover, goes through the rounds and reveals the peak of his insanity. There are scattered surprises, but like the impressive number of prime actors stretching awkwardly to spark their characters, *Red Dragon* plays mostly deflated. –*BF*

virgin

massive attack

100th window

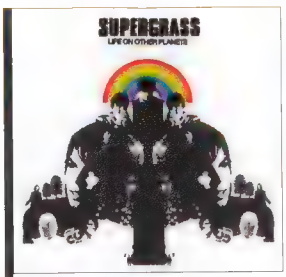
Massive Attack follow up their best and most interesting work with a similar yet increasingly familiar sound on *100th Window*, an album with strong highs and a couple track-skipping lows. Most the compositions follow the same routine, relying on an array of helpful vocal arrangements and ominous melodies, but where many albums in the genre strain on extended listens, Massive Attack show a gift for keeping the electronic beats intimate in their metallic dissonance.

mca

frou frou

details

Refreshing duo Imogen Heap and Guy Sigsworth aren't the typical electronic dance-music factory drones, pounding out metallic notes to serve the same tired machine. This melodic, occasionally striking collection of new-wave dance songs doesn't reek of overproduction, benefiting greatly from the pleasing, softening array of live instruments. A good amount of guests bring added musicianship as well. Perfect summer chill music.



def jam

supergrass

life on other planets

Supergrass may not quite rock and they don't quite pop, but they do write punchy tunes somewhere in the middle. This British trio does slippery and catchy, both loud and restrained, and you have no problem happily going with every bare song. Bands like these aren't rare and sound a little too familiar, but they all share the important common dominator: always satisfying.

atlantic

unwritten law

from music in high places

When rockers want to show that, "Hey, we have heart!" they turn to MTV and unplug. Taped stripped down and live in Yellowstone National Park, this high-energy everyman's album from Unwritten Law doesn't reach very deep, but what it reveals is a pleasant helping of heartfelt acoustic jams that work well with a good cold bear on the patio.

interscope

T.A.T.u.

200 km/h in the wrong lane

Since their debut single "I've Lost My Mind" shot to the top of the charts on Russian Radio, TATu have become a household name in Europe, and are currently gaining steam in America, where the duet's amazing pop-techno fusion is having a similar impact, on the heels of their video for the haunting "30 Minutes," the new album's first (and not very representative) single. As for their music, it should take you roughly about five seconds to fall completely in love. If nothing else, their chilling cover of the Smith's "How Soon Is Now?" alone is worth the price of the disc.

wind-up

daredevil

soundtrack album

Good movie, great soundtrack. Relive the best bits with quality tracks from Evanescence (remember the funeral dirge?), Drowning Pool with Rob Zombie, Fuel, Moby, Chevelle, Hoobastank, the token track from Nickelback that's supposed to bring back those loving Spidey feelings, and, as they say, many, many more. And if you haven't seen the movie yet... Check out the state of most critics: you really think they have a clue? If you like your comics dark, sans frilly glam, have a look. You can always close your eyes and soak in these awesome tunes.

mercury

rush

the spirit of radio '74-'87

Rock (or prog as they like to call it) of this caliber existed for a brief moment in the grand scheme of things, and it's unlikely rock will ever be as romantic again. Once upon a time, musicians ruled the day and bands like Led Zeppelin, Queen, Bowie and Yes were—excuse the expression—spiritual. To close your eyes and take in songs like "2112," "Subdivisions," "Force Ten" and especially "Time Stand Still" is to journey within oneself and emerge, to some extent, better. Every Rush collection has been overly mainstream, sticking to their shallows, but this one at least comes close to capturing their incredible presence.

atlantic

the donnas

spend the night

The Donnas may exemplify playful party rock but they can still bang with the best of 'em as evidenced on "Take It Off" in a vintage Kiss-circa-"Strutter" kind of way (okay, you can retract those tongues now). It's a shame, however, that there aren't more tracks like "Please Don't Tease," which dares to stray from the formulaic state of a record that starts to run together all too soon. If you've heard one track, you've pretty much heard them all.

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cell phone / game system

Nokia N-Gage

At an exclusive press conference on February 5, Nokia made an announcement that caused quite a stir in the gaming industry. The Finland-based mobile communications giant is planning to go head-to-head with Nintendo in the handheld market with its cool N-Gage game deck. Powering the N-Gage is a104MHz StrongARM processor. Unfortunately the RAM specifications weren't announced at the event but we're hoping it will have at least 64MB when it is launched this holiday season. The N-Gage can also double as an MP3 player, store names and addresses, receive FM radio signals and, of course, be used as a mobile phone. But the coolest feature of the N-Gage is its wireless functionality. The N-Gage will allow you to play local games via Bluetooth and remotely through GSM/GPRS mobile networks. Imagine playing a game with a friend of yours in the next state. Or better yet, in another country. Being on a wireless network will allow you to download additional content for games (levels, characters, etc). This is definitely Nokia's edge over Nintendo. But as we all know, content is king and Nokia is covering their bases. Confirmed third-party developers include THQ, Sega, EIDOS, Activision and Taito. There are rumors that Capcom and EA are also very interested in developing for N-Gage. Will it succeed? Will it flop? There is no way to tell right now. Nokia is planning on making a big splash at E3 this year and **play** will be there to check it all out.

www.n-gage.com
$tbd

tablet personal computer

Compaq TC1000

If you're in the market for a new laptop and you don't mind sacrificing a little performance for something incredibly sexy, then look no further than HP Compaq's Tablet PC TC1000. What makes the TC1000 so cool is how it combines three different computers in one unique design. For starters you can use it like any other tablet PC via stylus. On the go? Snap on the keyboard for notebook functionality. And finally, with the optional multifunctional docking station, the TC1000 turns into a more than capable desktop PC. Weighing in at a measly 3 pounds and measuri only 10.8 by 8.3 by 0.9 inches, the TC1000 is the thinne and lightest tablet PC around. Under the hood is 1GHz Transmeta Crusoe processor. Granted it's not the most powerful of the bunch, it still manages to get the job do Even though you won't be running any sort of high-end graphics program or the latest games on this unit, wher you whip out this bad boy in a meeting, you'll be the en of everyone in the room.

www.compaq.com
$1699

hd-based mp3/wav player

Creative Nomad Jukebox Zen

Creative Labs have once again changed the face of digital audio. Introducing the NOMAD Jukebox Zen, the sexiest digital music player out there. Measuring 4.43 inches long and 2.98 inches wide, the Zen doesn't sacrifice form for functionality. With 20GB of hard drive storage, it can hold up to 8,000 songs and supports both WMA and MP3 formats. And with the built-in rechargeable battery, you can jam away for up to 14 hours. But the coolest feature of the Zen is how it supports USB 2.0. What does this mean to you? Extremely fast file transfers to your unit from your computer (and vice versa) at 10 times the speed of conventional USB. And with the included AudioSync software, you can move your music collection across several computers. The Zen also utilizes EAX technology so you'll have a 4-band Equalizer, environmental effects, headphone spatialization and timescaling. With the optional FM wired remote, the Zen can double as an FM Tuner. Pretty slick.

www.nomadworld.com
$299

gear special

home theater guide

michael hobbs

What you will need...
- 32" or larger monitor
- 5.1 channel reciever
- six speakers (one center, one pair front, one pair rear, subwoofer)

Gamecube
The Gamecube can simulate five channel sound through Dolby Pro-Logic II, but this is not true 5.1 audio. As such, the stereo audio cables are all that you'll need to connect a Gamecube to a receiver for surround sound.

Xbox
To get 5.1 Dolby Digital or DTS sound from your Xbox, you'll need to run an optical audio cable from the Microsoft AV packs to the receiver. This will get you digital sound where applicable for both games and movies.

PlayStation 2
Like the Xbox, an optical connection supplies the digital audio signal to the receiver. Unlike on the Xbox, the PS2's optical output is located right on the back of the system.

starter

For this price range, a decent receiver and speaker pack will get you very acceptable multi-channel sound performance. Finding the highest fidelity music reproduction is a bit trickier, but for getting the impact of multi-channel movie and game soundtracks, this is a great place to start. You can get very good sound for under $1000.

Denon avr-1600

speaker pack

sony sav-e535

$499

how to shop for audio gear

There's no guarantee that the items shown here will suit your tastes or needs as they are merely examples of good starting points and decent reference equipment. If you want to explore further options, I offer this very useful advice: When it comes to buying audio equipment, avoid the temptation of going to an electronics supermarket like Best Buy. It is simply impossible to get a proper idea of how a particular piece of gear sounds in one of those places. The best place to look for audio equipment is in small, specialized, locally owned shops. Not only will they generally have proper listening areas and good speaker and cable selections, they are also more well informed and helpful than your typcial chain store employee. The better shops will even let you audition equipment in your home before commiting. It pays to look around a bit.

the myth about cables

It's true. If you have a mid-range system, there is no question that getting high quality interconnects and speaker cables makes a difference in both the picture and sound quality. A reasonable rule of the thumb is to spend about 10% of the overall system on cost on cables, including both system interconnects and speaker cables.

midrange

Within this range, you start to get very, very good sound reproduction. A mid range system should be capable of playing music at a very high fidelity as well as resolving a great amount of detal in movie and videogame soundtracks. Receivers in this price range should offer high bandwidth component switching and speakers most definitly should not have cheap spring clip terminals. At this level, you should also consider using premium cables, and it's a good idea to look into getting a dedicated DVD player, as it will generally offer better ultimate performance than a double duty Xbox or PlayStation 2.

receiver

denon avr-3803

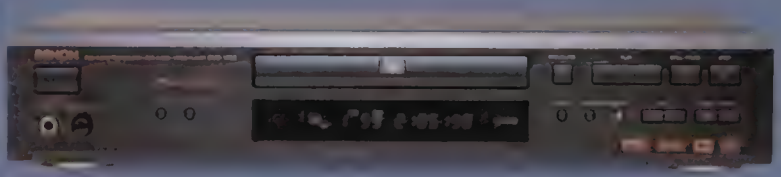
Now we're starting to get into some fairly good sound reproduction. A receiver such as this will not only handle nearly everything you throw at it, but it will sound great doing so. Nearly as good at playing music as it is playing movie and game soundtracks, an upper-midrange receiver, when paired with the right speakers and playback equipment can sound fabulous. This unit boasts support for all relevant digital audio formats, including seven channel DTS ES and Dolby Digital 6.1. In

definition video signals.

loudspeaker

b&w 600 series 3

If you're looking for truly fine sound, you enter the esoteric world of the seperately-purchased loudspeaker. This is one area where the Japanese have nothing on English and American makes. One of my favorite is U.K. based B&W. They offer extrodinary value for money, with speakers that often sound better than those twice as large and costing twice as much. These are their relatively modest 600 series 3, which comes in standmount, floor standing, center, and subwoofer configurations. You'll find nothing but high quality banana and spade connections around the back and first rate build, design, and sound. Keep in mind that speaker choice is probably the most subjectively quantified equation in any good hi fi, so listen carefully before you buy. I also reccomend Mission and JM Labs.



progressive scan dvd-audio

denon dvd-1600

how to set it up

Speaker placement is crucial for achieving the proper surround sound and stereo effects that you've payed so much to get. Every room is acoustically different, and finding the most pleasing sound is a matter of trial and error. Use the following as a starting point.

next month...

The search for a new monitor can lead you down several different roads. Will it be direct view or rear projection? Will it be widescreen or standard aspect ratio. Find out how to pick a set that will fill your needs and your budget in next month's issue of **play** magazine.

A HOTROD WITHOUT AN ENGINE...

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
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Violence

PlayStation.2

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